

A Brief Survey of Biblical Eschatology: Christ, Culture, and the Future

"Distribuite tempora, et concordat Scriptura." - Augustine

Introduction

Hesitations, disclaimers, clarifications, some classroom rules, “where I’m coming from”, and why I think we need to have an ongoing discussion like this one...

Eschatology

In his *Systematic Theology*, J. Oliver Buswell Jr. defines eschatology as the ‘systematic study of eventualities.’ This area of theology is the capstone of systematic theology, with every other locus of theology finding its resolution in it... In fact, eschatology is so significant for New Testament thought in general that many contemporary New Testament theologians are prepared to argue that New Testament theology *as a whole*, as the ‘age of fulfillment,’ is, if not eschatology *per se*, eschatologically oriented with respect to all of its major soteriological and ethical emphases. - Robert L. Raymond

Every other point of theology that has left some question unanswered eschatology should supply the answer:

- In theology proper – how God is finally perfectly glorified in the work of his hands, and how the counsel of God is finally realized.
- In anthropology – how the disrupting influence of sin is completely overcome.
- In Christology – how the work of Christ is crowned with perfect victory.
- In soteriology – how the work of the Holy Spirit at last issues in the complete redemption and glorification of the people of God.
- In ecclesiology – the question of the final glorification/sublime example of the church.

The End Is Here! Again!

Whenever 'eschatology' or end-times prophecy is mentioned, what are the first things which come to people's minds? What kinds of conversations do you hear? What are the common expectations and where did they really get them?

Great Tribulation	Antichrist
Mark of the Beast	Persecution
Global Catastrophes	Judgment
Immorality	Godlessness
Suffering, Pain, Death...	The end must be near...
Surely, the Lord must be coming soon...	

Historical despair is rampant. And remarkably, the popular Christian expectation regarding the future is, in an important sense, not very different from the secularist view. Both the evangelical Christian community and the secular world anticipate a future ending in chaos and despair. This conviction has grown and now pervades so much of the popular imagination. **It has become the foregone conclusion.** In fact, while documenting the inevitability of a gloomy future, most popular Christian prophecy writers employ the same data derived at and used by secular analyses.

Now when these things come to people's minds and you hear their conversations about the subject, what are some of the common reactions...really?

Fear	Sorrow
Ruin	Confusion
Dread	Hopelessness and Despair...
Inevitability	Expectation
Joy	Longing
Peace	Hopefulness

How are people, in general, motivated by what they believe about the future? How are *Christians* motivated by what they believe about the future? Do such expectations produce holy living and a deeper devotion to Christ? What do ideas about the future motivate people to do or not to do? Can some become overwhelmed and immobilized into a state of paralysis? Does it make some want to escape, hide, and withdraw? Does it help to promote a 'survivalist' attitude? Do others just give up and submit to the inevitable? Do some just decide to stand firm

and hope against all hope? Do some cling to a false hope, or anything which *might* seem to give them hope? Do some glory in sensationalistic notions?

What assumptions are out there? What assumptions (we all have them) do you have? What things might you have accepted as foregone conclusions?

“In many cases sheer fanaticism has been the result of exclusively dwelling on prophecy, and probably more men have gone mad on that subject than on any other religious question.” — Charles H. Spurgeon

So, how *should* we go about approaching the subject for our study?

Starting With the Correct Perspectives

I think, if we begin with a healthy *biblical* attitude, and a sound understanding of what the *whole* of the Scriptures teach us about eschatology, we will be better equipped, as well as motivated, to be and to do that which pleases our Heavenly Father... as we anticipate and look forward with joy and hope to the future which *he* has for us. In this we must surely realize more completely that *he* is our only hope. It is my prayer that this study may be helpful to each of you in this way.

First, the correct attitude:

“For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Timothy 1:7).

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me” (John 14:1).

“Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” (Romans 12:11-12).

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Romans 15:13).

“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all” (2 Thessalonians 3:16).

“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of

the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20).

Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth! (Psalm 46:10).

They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9).

“And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true’ (Revelation 21:5).

“...I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (Matthew 16:18).

Second, we need to understand that:

Eschatology is written into the whole fabric of the Scriptures. It is the ‘the story within’. It is not painted onto the outside like a decoration. It is in the whole story of Scripture, beginning to end, not just its conclusion. Properly comprehending God’s eschatological message requires a working knowledge of the whole course and framework of God’s revelation in Scripture. This is what the whole unfolding plot of biblical redemptive-history is all about.

But what is the tone of this biblical eschatology? What are the overarching lyrics and melody of this great song? What do we, as Christians, need to expect about all this *despite* what the world would have us believe?

Third, we need to be confident that:

Scripture’s eschatology is oriented toward **redemption and hope**. This is the unmistakable message of both the Old and the New Testaments. Our Christian faith embodies this message of redemption and hope. In John 1:29 we are told of the redemptive Lamb who provides the hope of salvation. Is this not at the very heart of the gospel itself?

And as always, we need to define our terms.

Every field of study has its own vocabulary. Often these words and terms have become technical and have meanings that are specific to the things being discussed. This is only natural and necessary to communicate in any field of study. So, it is with the study of eschatology. And to be able to maneuver this canoe, we need have the correct paddles. As we go along, we’ll

have to make sure we define and understand the words and terms we use in our study of eschatology as we go along.

Six Fundamental Rules

1. Eschatology does matter.

- a. What one believes about the *future* will determine how one lives his life *now*.
- b. It's just not possible to fully understand the Scriptures apart from the Bible's *redemptive-historical plot*.

Since eschatology is so important, we must...

2. Be aware of *assumptions* and don't blindly accept *forgone conclusions*.

3. Don't begin with eschatology. If you want a biblical understanding of eschatology you must not begin with 'last things' first and impose that upon the rest of Scripture. A sound biblical eschatology will come only from a sound understanding of 'first things' first. And you need to have a good handle on the *whole* of Scripture. Your tool box, so to speak, needs to be as full as possible. If all you have in your tool box is a hammer, everything will begin to look like a nail.

"Winston Churchill once defined a fanatic as one who cannot change his mind and who will not change the subject. To this we might add that he will not change the subject because once he is out of his 'area of expertise', he really knows very little and has nothing to say." – Douglas Wilson

4. The Bible is an interwoven whole. If you hold to a certain eschatological scheme and one of its threads does not hold it will affect the other parts of your theology. It's like a seamless garment in which when one edge snags and starts to unravel the whole thing will eventually come undone. You need to reevaluate that scheme in the light of the whole of Scripture. The Bible is still its own best interpreter.

5. It's not just about the 'train schedule'. Very seldom is it just a debate about eschatological chronology. There's a lot more to it than just a simple dispute over the timing for the end times. The fundamental debate will most likely be over the '**nature**' of the things being dealt with *as well* as the '**timing**'. Often the nature of an event is re-defined, twisted, ignored, or discarded to accommodate a desired timing (see #3 above). We must always be sensitive to what might be lurking theologically just below the surface of the thing.

A Demonstration Of Mad Professor Cochran's 'Fruit Bowls' of Redemptive History!

Ladies and gentlemen! Children of all ages! Your attention please! I shall now attempt, with the help of my lovely assistant, to present for your edification and viewing pleasure a demonstration of **Mad Professor Cochran's Fruit Bowls of Redemptive History!** Beware; this demonstration may not be suitable for the faint of heart, pregnant women, or those who suffer from nervous conditions. Now, you may want to stay back. This could get very messy. Make sure your seats are in their upright positions and your safety belts are securely fastened. And please keep your hands inside the bus at all times.

And so...

6. We must always be asking, **“What are the redemptive consequences?”**

Part One: End Times In the Old Testament

Jewish Eschatological Expectations

In order to understand the eschatological time texts of the New Testament, it is important to understand their biblical context. The eschatological time texts of the New Testament do not exist in a vacuum. It is necessary to examine these texts within the broader eschatological framework of the New Testament and the Jewish eschatological context in which the New Testament documents were written. The answers to these questions will help us to better understand the meaning of the New Testament eschatological writings.

What was the eschatological expectation of the Old Testament authors? What are the major eschatological themes found in the Old Testament?

It was the job of the Old Testament prophets basically to remind/warn Israel of the following:

- God's covenant with Israel with the stipulation of obedience/disobedience – blessing/curse (see Deuteronomy 28-30).
- Continued covenant breaking would result in judgment and exile (Isaiah 1:10-20, 21-24, 31; 2:19-21; 5:30; 29:6; 51:17; Jeremiah 4:23; 25:11, 16-18; 26:3; Ezekiel 5:9, 10; 16:15ff; 16:31ff, 46; 22: 17-22; 23; 38-39; Daniel 9:2, 24-27; Hosea 4:15; Amos 8:2; 9:8; Micah 1:3-5).
- Judgment would also come upon Israel's enemies (Isaiah 13:6-22; 16:14; 19:1; 21:16; 24:21-23; 26:14; 34:8-10; Jeremiah 25:17-26; 51:6-7; Ezekiel 27; 28:11-19; 38-39; Daniel

2:24-40; 7:11-12, 22, 26; Joel 3:12; Jonah 3:4; Habakkuk 2:3-4; Zechariah 12:1-9; Malachi 4:1).

- A number of texts in the Old Testament reference a coming judgment as **“the day of the Lord”** (Isaiah 2:12; 13:6; Jeremiah 46:10; Ezekiel 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7; 1:14-15; Zechariah 14:2; Malachi 4:1). As you can see, the term ‘day of the Lord’ is used to describe not only the coming judgment upon Israel, but also the coming of specific judgments upon Babylon, Egypt, and other nations as well. All of these different events that are referred to as ‘the day of the Lord’ are types of the final day of the Lord.
- They could look forward to a time of restoration after judgment, involving warning, judgment, exile, and a re-gathering of a remnant of Israel (Isaiah 10:20-22; 11:11; 43:5-7; Jeremiah 31:7-8; 31:31ff; Ezekiel 28:25; 34:11ff; 36:24; 37:1-14, 21; Hosea 1:11; Amos 9:8, 11-15; Micah 2:12; 4:6-7; Zephaniah 3:20; Zechariah 8:8).
- They looked forward to a time when Israel would be restored, the temple would be rebuilt, God’s law would be obeyed, and creation would be renewed (Isaiah 28:16ff; 44:26; 58:12; 61:4; Ezekiel 36:33; 40-48; Haggai 2:7-9). The restoration of Israel would involve a new covenant and true obedience to the law of God (Jeremiah 31:31ff; Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:25-28; Joel 2:28; Micah 4:3). This restoration of Israel is often spoken of in terms of the coming of the kingdom of God (Isaiah 9:6-7; Ezekiel 37:24-25; Daniel 2:24-40; 7:13-14, 18, 22, 27; Zechariah 9:9-10), the hope of a coming Messiah (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7; 11:1ff.; 49:6; 52:13-53:12; Ezekiel 21: 27; 37:24-25; 43:1ff.; Daniel 7:13-14; Micah 5:2; Haggai 2:7-9; Zechariah 3:8), and as the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89:3).
- The nations would one day be converted to the worship of the true God and Gentiles will have the same status before God as Israel (Genesis 12:3; Isaiah 2:2-4; 11:9-10; 19:18-25; 29:17; 49:6; 60:3; Micah 4:1-2).
- Finally, the ultimate destruction of evil, sin and the restoration of God’s creation (Isaiah 11:6; 25:8; 60:19-20; 65:17-25). God’s redemptive purpose is not limited to the salvation of individual souls. Sin has affected *all* of God’s creation, and God’s redemptive purpose is just as far-reaching.

Understanding Old Testament Prophetic Language

What kind of language is used in the Old Testament prophecies? Since New Testament prophecy includes many of these same elements (poetry, metaphor, apocalyptic language, and heavenly visions), understanding Old Testament language will help us as we attempt to understand the use of this language in the New Testament.

- Cosmic Judgment Language

Commonly the prophets described the catastrophes that were to befall Israel and her enemies in terms of the earth being shaken, the stars falling, and the sun and moon being darkened (Isaiah 2:19, 21; 5:30; 13:10, 13; 24:19-20; 29:6; 30:26; 34:4, 8-10; 51:6; 64:1; 66:24; Jeremiah 4:23; 7:20; 10:10; Ezekiel 5:9; 32:7; 38:19-20; Joel 2:10, 30-31; 3:15-16; Haggai 2:6; Zechariah 14:12).

Note: Many of these prophecies describe judgments that occurred centuries ago. **This ‘cosmic judgment language’ is a metaphorical way of describing the fall of earthly kingdoms.** We use similar language today when we describe an event as “earth-shattering.” **Contrary to current popular beliefs (and the many lucrative book sales and movies), the use of such language by the prophets does not necessarily indicate that they were referring to the end of the space-time universe!**

- The ‘Cloud’ Language

Another interesting type of language is found in texts such as Isaiah 19:1. Isaiah speaks here, in the eighth century B.C., of the imminent judgment of Egypt. He describes God’s judgment in terms of God coming to Egypt riding on a cloud. Similar language is found in several other prophetic texts (Isaiah 31:4; 35:4; 66:15; Micah 1:3-5).

Note: None of these texts is intended to communicate the idea that God is literally going to ride on a cloud into one of these nations. **The point of the prophecy is that the judgment that is coming is the judgment of God, not just an unfortunate calamity!**

Old Testament Prophetic Time Texts

How the prophets used different time indicators and how they were fulfilled in their historical context will help us in our understanding of the use of such texts in the New Testament.

- Limited Time Frames: the description of a coming specific judgment that will fall upon a specific people within a limited time frame (Isaiah 7:8, 16; 16:14; 21:16; Jeremiah 25:11; Daniel 9:2; Jonah 3:4. With Isaiah 7:8 see 2 Kings 17:24; 2 Chronicles 33:11 for its fulfillment).

See Daniel 9:24-27 with Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10 in light of Leviticus 26 especially verse 18. The principle of sevenfold judgment can be repeated many times.

- Limited Time Frames with Vague Meanings: no consensus as to the specific meaning of these texts (Ezekiel 4:5-6; Daniel 8:14; 12:11-12).

- Nonspecific Time Frames: we are not told specifically when the event will occur (Ezekiel 21:27; Daniel 12:5-7; Hosea 6:2; Malachi 4:5).
- Short-Term Time Texts: passages that point to the imminence or presence of a particular prophesied event (Isaiah 13:22; Habakkuk 2:3-4).

Numerous passages speak of certain things being 'near' or 'at hand.' 'The day of the Lord' is often said to be near or at hand (Ezekiel 30:3; Joel 1:15; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7, 14). Isaiah 56:1 says that God's salvation is 'about to come' and Ezekiel 12:23 says that 'the fulfillment of every vision' is 'at hand'.

- The End of What?

Both Amos (8:2) and Ezekiel (7:2-3) declare that 'the end' has come. In Amos 'the end' refers to the northern kingdom. In Ezekiel 'the end' refers to the judgment that has befallen Judah.

Neither refers to the end of the world!

The book of Daniel was written in the sixth century B.C. and contains extremely precise and detailed prophecies that occurred during the second century B.C. Daniel foresaw the rise of the Greek empire under Alexander the Great, its breakup into four kingdoms at his death, and the battles between the Ptolemaic (Egyptian) and Seleucid (Syrian) kingdoms. Daniel foresaw the rule of a particularly evil Seleucid ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes, under whom the Jews suffered horrible persecution. **This vision was clearly fulfilled in the second century B.C. yet is referred to as 'the time of the end' (Daniel 8:17)!**

Note: It should be evident that when we see a reference to 'the end' in Scripture, we must ask, "the end of what?" We cannot simply assume that 'the end' in question is the end of the world. Nor can we automatically assume that it means 'the end of the Jewish age.' Jewish history clearly continued beyond the second century B.C. 'time of the end.' If someone had applied such an assumption to Daniel 8 in the first century B.C., the possibility of **the first coming of Christ would have been ruled out!**

- 'Latter Times' and 'The End of Days' (Isaiah 2:2-4; Ezekiel 38:8; Daniel 8:19; 10:14; 12:13; Micah 4:1) These are certain passages which seem to point to something that even now has not been completely fulfilled. Some 'latter' passages, however, do seem to be connected with events which have already occurred in history (Daniel 8:19).
- Telescoping: when a prophet describes events that are now known to be widely separated in time but does so without giving any indication that they are so separated and 'telescoping' them into one continuous prophecy (Daniel 11:2-20, 21-35 and 11:36-12:3).

Note: No one reading this before any of it was fulfilled would have been able to detect a change of subject at verse 36).

- Recapitulation of Events/Typological Applications in Christ: Daniel 11:31 in the light of second century B.C. history and Matthew 24:15-16. Isaiah 7:14-16 was the *imminent* fulfillment to Ahaz and the child Shalal-Hash-Baz according to Isaiah 8:3-4 yet according to Matthew 1:23 this prophecy was *typologically* fulfilled by the birth of Jesus many centuries later.

Note: The apostles saw in certain redemptive events in the history of Israel that there were recapitulations of those events in the life of Christ. Thus He was seen as the ultimate fulfillment of true Israel, the true Seed of Abraham.

Part Two: New Testament Eschatology

Martha then said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give you.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:21-26)

Jesus and the apostles were fluent in the language and imagery of the Old Testament. They used that language and imagery to proclaim their message. If we are to understand the prophetic texts of the New Testament, we must remember that the parts must be seen in the context of the whole. For that reason, we must examine these texts within the broader eschatological framework of the *whole* of God’s Word.

Preliminary Observations: The Contemporary Approaches

Although redemption and hope are intertwined themes running through the *entire* Bible, Christians have understood these themes in different ways. Despite redemptive hope being rooted in the revelation of God in the *whole* of Scripture, Christian theologians have come to separate into four basic approaches to eschatological matters based upon just *one* passage.

These approaches have come to be known as ‘millennial’ views. They are premillennialism, amillennialism, postmillennialism, and dispensationalism. This idea of ‘millennialism’ comes from Revelation 20:1-6, which speaks of a ‘thousand year’ (Latin: mille + annum) reign of Christ.

I do think it's unfortunate, and I resent the fact, that this one passage has come to dominate the entire discussion of contemporary biblical eschatology. This is unfortunate in that the expression 'millennium' only occurs in this one single passage in all of Scripture, and in the most symbolic book in the Bible. You will find no other mention of a thousand year reign in any other passage in the whole of Scripture. If we understand the depth and majesty of the biblical eschatological outlook, we shouldn't expect any *single* text to present an entire eschatological system – not even Revelation 20. Well, I didn't make the rules. And I'm not especially happy about the rules of the game, but they're what we have and what we have to deal with. (These are labels which I think do not really work, so I don't personally attach any of them to myself.)

In my opinion, the eschatological debate (the 'millennial views') doesn't need to come to Revelation 20 at all. It is better waged elsewhere in Scripture – almost *everywhere else* in Scripture! The scriptural 'proof' for a certain position should be built up from a very wide range of Old and New Testament Scriptures.

Certainly, amillennialism and postmillennialism do not depend on Revelation 20. Dispensationalism and premillennialism absolutely do. This passage, which has come to define the debate, is really not *useful* to the 'millennial' debate!

Someone once defined the millennium as a thousand years of peace that Christians love to fight about.

The Four Basic Millennial Views

Amillennialism

The term 'amillennial' is from *a* (which means 'no') and *mille* ('thousand') and *annum* (which means 'years'). The amillennial view denies a literal thousand year reign of Christ on earth or even any millennial-type conditions on earth *before* Christ's second advent (in history).

Amillennialists hold that Christ established his kingdom in the first century as a spiritual-redemptive reality. The Church is the focal point of Christ's redemptive kingdom. It will grow and win many converts to Christ and serve as his witness to the world. The present age is the 'millennium', which is a symbolic value picturing a long period of time. However, Christ's kingdom will never achieve a majority status in the world and will eventually decline into apostasy as history collapses into the chaos of the great tribulation, opening the door to the Antichrist. Christ will then return to destroy his enemies, resurrect the dead, judge all men, and establish the eternal order.

The following are good sources in defense of the amillennial view:

Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times*

Premillennialism

The term 'premillennial' derives from the combining of three Latin terms: *pre* ('before'), *mille* ('thousand'), and *annum* ('years'). The prefix *pre* signifies that Christ will return *before* the millennium in order to establish it.

Premillennialists believe that Christ initiated the *spiritual, anticipatory phase* of his kingdom in the first century. In the kingdom's current spiritual phase God is gathering an elect people into the Church. But history will eventually decline into the great tribulation when the Antichrist arises and the Church apostatizes. After this Christ will return to resurrect deceased believers and transform living ones, fight the battle of Armageddon, and establish his one thousand year reign on the earth. At the very end of the millennium Satan will be loosed and will gather a rebellion against Christ, only to have God intervene to destroy Satan, resurrect deceased unbelievers and transform living ones, judge all men, and establish the eternal order.

The following are good sources in defense of the premillennial view:

Craig L. Bloomberg and Sung Wook Chung, eds., *A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to "Left Behind" Eschatology*

Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 3: *Spirit-Given Life: God's People Present and Future*

Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism is a relatively new version of premillennialism, having been created around 1830 by the Plymouth Brethren pastor, J. Nelson Darby. The term 'dispensation' reflects this system's dividing history into seven distinct dispensations (or eras), wherein the world operates under distinguishably different God-revealed principles, subject to specific divine testings, and with each ending in an historical divine judgment. The present dispensation is that of Grace, which encompasses the Church Age. The next dispensation will be the last, the millennium.

Dispensationalism teaches that Christ established the Church as a new and distinct people, when Israel rejected his kingdom offer in the first century. The present age is not the kingdom, but a parenthesis in the major plan of God (which focuses on Israel). Toward the end it will decline into chaos as the Church apostatizes, then Christ will return secretly to rapture true believers out of the world. Following this, the seven year great tribulation will erupt over all the earth as the Antichrist arises to dominate the world.

After this, Christ will return visibly, bodily, and majestically to resurrect deceased believers and transform living ones, fight the battle of Armageddon, and establish his one thousand year

Jewish political reign on the earth. During his millennial rule righteousness and peace will prevail throughout the world. At the very end of the millennium Satan will be loosed and will organize a rebellion against Christ and his rule over the world. Then God will intervene to destroy Satan, resurrect deceased unbelievers and transform living ones, judge all men, and establish the eternal order.

Dispensationalism is the most complex of the millennial schools. It teaches that God established a series of seven dispensations (rather than simply having the new covenant age following the old covenant), has two distinct plans for two separate peoples (Israel and the Church), and that he interrupts one plan (for Israel) with another (for the Church), then returns to his first plan (for Israel) after he removes the Church from the world. It also holds that God established worship on the basis of a sacrificial system (in the Old Testament), replaced it with a spiritual system of worship (in the New Testament), then will replace that one with another sacrificial system (in the millennium). It also has Christ returning two more times, one secretly to rapture his Church and one publicly to establish the millennium.

Contemporary advocates of dispensationalism (the majority view among evangelicals today) include the following:

Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*

Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology: Church, Last Things*

Postmillennialism

The term 'postmillennial' is taken from the compounding of three Latin terms: *post* ('after'), *mille* ('thousand'), and *annum* ('years'). The prefix *post* indicates that Christ will return *after* the millennium, that is, after 'millennial' conditions prevail upon the earth. As with amillennialism, most postmillennialists today understand the 'thousand years' in Revelation as symbolizing an extended period of time, much like 'the cattle on a thousand hills' symbolizes an enormous number of cattle (Psalm 50:10) or like a thousand years of our time picturing one of God's days (Psalm 90:4).

Postmillennialists teach that Christ established his kingdom in the first century as a spiritual-redemptive reality which is embodied in his Church. And it's through the gospel's Spirit-empowered proclamation, that most contemporary postmillennialists understand that Christianity will increasingly grow over time until it becomes the dominate influence in the world. The kingdom's growth will produce increasing righteousness, peace, and prosperity, which will eventually prevail over the world for a long period of time. At the end of a long period of righteousness, Christ will return, resurrect all men, affect the Great Judgment, and establish the eternal order.

Contemporary presentations of postmillennialism include:

Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology*

Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope*

Historical Optimism vs. Historical Pessimism:

All four millennial systems are Christian systems committed to the expectation of *ultimate* redemptive hope. Thus, they all unite in expressing the same *final* hope: God will finally conquer sin and Satan and establish an eternal order of glorious perfection.

However, they differ in how they understand redemptive hope's impact on history *before* the final new heavens and new earth. Despite their agreement on the *ultimate* victory of God in eternity, three of the systems are *historically* pessimistic, one is *historically* optimistic. The three *historically* pessimistic systems are premillennialism, amillennialism, and dispensationalism.

The historically pessimistic-optimistic issue is the key matter distinguishing postmillennialism from the other three systems. Those eschatologies are *historically* pessimistic in that:

1. They deny that Christ's Church will grow to exercise a worldwide gracious influence over the affairs of man *before* Christ returns.
2. They deny that Christians should labor toward gospel victory *in history*.
3. They agree that history will ultimately collapse into chaos and despair before Christ returns.

The postmillennial system is *historically* optimistic in that it takes the opposite position on these three issues. For helpful interaction between the various millennial views see the following works:

Darrell L. Bock, ed., *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*

Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*

Note: An optimistic redemptive hope was held by several notable early church fathers such as Eusebius, Athanasius, and Augustine. We should not label these men as 'postmillennial' because the eschatological systems as such only gradually developed as distinct, formal systems later in Church history. Tendencies of an optimistic redemptive hope were prevalent among the Reformers and the Puritans. A must read is, Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy*.

John Calvin himself wrote:

Our doctrine must tower unvanquished above all the glory and above all the might of the world, for it is not of us, but of the living God and his Christ whom the Father has appointed King to 'rule from sea to sea, and from the rivers even to the ends of the earth' ...And he is so to rule as to smite the whole earth with its iron and brazen strength, with its gold and silver brilliance, shattering it with the rod of his mouth as an earthen vessel, just as the prophets have prophesied concerning the magnificence of his reign (Institutes 1:12).

Optimistic redemptive hope eventually dominated Protestant eschatological thinking in the late 1600's through the early 1900's. It was eclipsed in the early 1900's, due largely it seems, to the growing presence of theological liberalism, the outbreak of World War I, and especially because of the growing popularity of dispensational thinking.

Preterism, Hyper-Preterism, Futurism...

R C Sproul defines **preterism** as: An eschatological viewpoint that places many or all eschatological events in the past, especially during the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. (R.C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, p 228)

The word *preterism* (Latin: *preteritus* 'gone by, past') has traditionally been used to describe the view that many of the prophecies in the New Testament writings were fulfilled in the first century (*our past, their immediate future*). Because of the growth of **hyper-preterism** this definition needs more defining.

Note: It is critically important to distinguish between partial preterism and hyper-preterism.

Partial preterism understands that *some* prophecy was fulfilled in the generation of Jesus' day, while hyper-preterism maintains that *all* prophecy was fulfilled at that time. (We will be taking a closer look at hyper-preterism later.)

Partial preterism is known by several different names: preterism, partial preterism, moderate preterism, orthodox preterism, classic preterism, historic preterism, redemptive-historical preterism...

Likewise, **hyper-preterism** is known by several different names: Preterism, full preterism, hyper-preterism, consistent preterism, total preterism, transmillennialism™, pantelism, Hymenaeism (see 2 Timothy 2:16-18; 1 Timothy 1:20)...

Futurism holds that most if not all prophecy has yet to be fulfilled. Others would maintain that while some of these prophecies had an initial or typological fulfillment in the first century, their ultimate or primary fulfillment remains to be seen.

Note: It could be said, that in the way we understand the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, we are all preterists and futurist to one degree or another.

Note: Despite differences over these views in secondary matters, all who hold to the biblical historical Christian faith stand shoulder to shoulder in their confession that the Second Advent of Jesus Christ, the General Resurrection, and the Last Judgment are yet to come and are futurists in this most important sense.

Note: As you can tell from the definitions above, hyper-preterism falls outside of biblical orthodoxy and the Christian faith. **No criticism of partial preterism should be done by knowingly confusing it with hyper-preterism. The distinction must always be maintained.**

Hyper-preterism is not just another valid alternative to understanding Scripture, but has become a separate religion altogether. I am convinced it is an eschatological approach which has stumbled into heresy and is desperately attempting to cover itself in a cloak of orthodoxy.

Central Eschatological Themes and Language in the Gospels

The Kingdom of God

One of the central themes of the Gospels is the coming of the kingdom of God. The Old Testament prophets spoke of the coming restoration of Israel and what that would entail in terms of the coming kingdom of God. John the Baptist and Jesus arrive on the scene both saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand” (Matthew 3:2; 4:17). In effect, what they are saying to the people is, “Get ready, because the long-awaited promises of the restoration of Israel are about to be fulfilled.”

But is there some ambiguity in the biblical language?

- The kingdom is said to be ‘at hand’ or literally ‘near’ (Matthew 3:2, 4:17, 10:7).
- The kingdom is said to be already present in some sense (Matthew 12:28).
- The kingdom is yet to come: (Matthew 6:10). The emphasis here is on the fact that God’s kingdom has not yet come in its fullness, and that God’s will is not yet being done on earth as perfectly as it is being done in heaven. The disciples are to pray that these things will happen.

This Age and the Age to Come

In the first century, the Jews tended to view history in terms of a present age and an age to come. The age to come would involve the restoration of Israel, the coming of the Messiah, the rebuilding of the Temple, the vanquishing of Israel’s enemies, etc. This language about the ages is used in the Gospels (Matthew 12:32).

Judgment

- **Pictured as Present** (John 12:31-32 'now' and connected with Christ's crucifixion).
- **Imminent and to Come Upon 'This Generation'** (Matthew 23:35-36). Jesus declares that the covenant curses will be poured out on Jerusalem because of the Jews' refusal to accept him as the Messiah, then he indicates when and to whom this will happen.

Whenever else the phrase 'this generation' is used in Matthew (11:16; 12:41, 42, 45), it refers to the generation of Jews to whom Jesus was speaking. So, if the phrase means the same thing in 23:36, then Jesus was warning that a serious judgment was going to befall the Jews of his day! (See the use of 'this generation' in Mark 8:12; Luke 7:31; 11:30-32, 50-51; 17:25.)

- **Luke 21:22 and Hyper-Preterism.** According to hyper-preterism, this text clearly indicates that all New Testament prophecy was to be fulfilled in the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem. Is this what Jesus meant?

Luke 18:31 makes it clear that when Jesus refers to 'all things' being fulfilled, he is simply referring to everything pertaining to that part of his redemptive work. Obviously the Second Advent did not occur at his crucifixion. Not even hyper-preterism goes that far! (What of the other New Testament prophecies written *after* Jesus' ascension?) The same is true of his reference to 'all things' in Luke 21:22.

Resurrection

By the first century, the prevailing Jewish belief was in a bodily resurrection of the dead except for the Sadducees (Mark 12:18) and some Jews who adopted the Greek view that an immortal soul survived in a bodiless existence after death. This is the historical context in which Jesus spoke about resurrection.

- **John 5:24-29:** In verses 25-27 Jesus says that the 'hour is coming *and now is.*' But in verses 28-29, he says only that 'the hour is coming.' The answer seems to be found in verse 24, where Jesus says that believers to whom he is speaking have 'passed from death into life' (Ephesians 2:5-6; Colossians 2:13). The addition of the words 'and now is' in verses 25-27 seems to point to the fact that there is a present aspect to what Jesus is speaking. Verses 28-29, on the other hand, refer to something that is still future.

In this passage, Jesus is saying that people who hear his word and believe are already passing from spiritual death to spiritual life. At some time in the future, there will be a bodily resurrection from the dead. The two ideas are connected because the bodies of

all who have been raised from spiritual death to spiritual life will be raised from their 'graves' as well.

See also: Romans 8:11; I Corinthians 15.

- **John 6:39-40, 44, and 54:** This passage repeatedly emphasizes that 'on the last day' Jesus will raise those who believe in him. The 'raising' is something that is said to be a future event. This fact rules out the possibility that these verses are referring to spiritual resurrection. Spiritual resurrection was *already* occurring, according to John 5:24.

The Coming of the Son of Man

The passages in the Gospels that refer to the coming of the Son of Man are especially critical to an understanding/misunderstanding of New Testament eschatology.

- **Matthew 10:23:** In context 'you' refers to the twelve disciples. Something is going to happen in a relatively short time. The Son of Man is going to come. Commentators have interpreted this verse in a number of different ways:
 1. The disciples wouldn't finish going through the cities of Israel before he caught up with them.
 2. The Son of Man would 'come' by being vindicated as the Messiah at his resurrection.
 3. This is a use of prophetic foreshortening or telescoping to refer to the Second Coming in the distant future.
 4. Dispensationalists tend to understand the text as a reference to the Second Coming that does not take into account their parenthetical church age.
 5. Jesus is referring here to the coming judgment of Jerusalem that climaxed in the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.
- **Matthew 16:27-28:** Jesus tells his disciples that within the lifetime of some of those standing there, the Son of Man will come in his kingdom.
 1. See the various understandings given above.
 2. Refers to the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8).
- **The Olivet Discourse:** Matthew 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21:5-38; Luke 17:20-37. It is the final week of Jesus' life and at this point in the Gospel accounts:

Jesus has entered the city triumphantly.

He has cleansed the temple.

He has had his authority challenged by the scribes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees.

Jesus has made his pronouncement of woe upon this rebellious generation of Jews (Matthew 23).

Now it is at this point the disciples ask Jesus, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming, and the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3). The Olivet discourse is Jesus' answer to this question.

In the first section: There will be false messiahs, wars, and rumors of wars. "The end is not yet."

There will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes. These are 'the beginning of sorrows'.

There will be persecutions, false prophets, and lawlessness. "He who endures to the end shall be saved."

"This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come".

In the next section: Jesus warns his followers to flee quickly when they see the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel.

What follows will be great tribulation 'such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be'.

His followers are not to believe reports that he is in the desert or in some secret meeting rooms. The coming of the Son of Man will be like lightning.

In the cosmic judgment language of the Old Testament prophets used to describe impending judgments upon nations, he tells them that 'immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken' (Note Hebrews 12:22-28).

It is at this point that Jesus says, "Then the Son of Man will appear in heaven, then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory".

He will send his angels to gather his elect from one end of heaven to the other.

Jesus uses a parable about a fig tree to tell his disciples that when they see all these things, they will know that it is near.

And then in Matthew 24:34-35 Jesus makes the statement that has become the source of so much controversy.

Jesus continues by explaining that the coming of the Son of Man will be as unexpected as the Flood was in the days of Noah.

He tells the parables of the faithful and evil servants, the wise and foolish virgins, and the talents. In each of these parables the main point is that Jesus' followers must remain diligent and faithful while he is away, because he could come unexpectedly at any time.

In the final section of the Olivet discourse, Jesus describes the Son of Man coming and sitting on his throne to judge the nations. The judgment is described in terms of a separation of sheep and goats.

What does all this mean?

Each of the passages we've looked at above (Matthew 10:23; 16:27-28; 24-25) seems to portray the coming of the Son of Man as something that would occur soon after the words were spoken. This has perplexed commentators for a long time. What are the solutions/explanations offered?

1. Hyper-preterists hold that Jesus' second coming occurred in the first century in fulfillment of these prophecies and that this is the only solution that solves all of the difficulties surrounding these texts. They argue this is the only interpretation that maintains the integrity of Jesus. They believe the only real alternative to this is the liberal's (number 2 below).
2. Jesus was simply wrong.
3. 'This generation' does not refer to the generation to whom Jesus was speaking. It could refer to the Jewish people/race.
4. 'This generation' refers to the generation that sees the *beginning* of these signs. In other words, whatever future generation sees these signs begin to be fulfilled will not pass away until the Son of Man comes (a favorite of dispensationalists).
5. Most commentators believe that 'this generation' refers in *some sense* to the generation that heard Jesus' words...with several possible variations (of course!):
 - a. This generation will by no means pass away till all these things *begin to come to pass*.

- b. The phrase 'all these things' doesn't include the coming of the Son of Man. If this is the case, then Jesus merely predicted the destruction of Jerusalem would occur in the first century.
- c. The time texts in Matthew should be understood in terms of double fulfillment. These events were fulfilled in the first century to a certain degree, but their ultimate fulfillment is still to come.
- d. The term 'generation' here refers to something more like an 'age' or 'era' of indeterminate length.
- e. Matthew 24:4-35 refers to the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem in the first century. Matthew 24:36-25:46 refers to the future Second Coming and Last Judgment. According to this view, Jesus utilized the prophetic technique of telescoping two distant events into one prophecy without much indication of a change in subject.

The Big Assumption

Of the interpretations we have examined thus far all share the assumption that 'the coming of the Son of Man' must mean 'the second coming of Jesus'.

Those who think Jesus just made a mistake conclude that Jesus said his second coming would occur in the first century. Since it obviously didn't happen, Jesus was wrong.

According to dispensationalists, Jesus said that his second coming would occur before 'this generation' passed away. Since Jesus' second coming did not occur visibly in the first century, and since Jesus cannot be wrong, they conclude that 'this generation' must not refer to first-century Jews.

According to hyper-preterists, Jesus said that his second coming would occur during the first century. Since it didn't occur visibly, and since Jesus can't be wrong, they conclude that his second coming must have been invisible.

But...there is another possibility that must be considered!

An Alternative to the Big Assumption

For the sake of argument, let us assume that 'this generation' *does* refer to the generation of Jews who heard Jesus' words, and that the phrase 'all these things' *does* include the coming of the Son of Man, and there isn't any double fulfillment or telescoping. In other words, let us assume that Jesus said that the coming of the Son of Man *would* occur during the first century.

But *unlike* each of the positions above, let us consider another significant possibility – namely, that when Jesus used the phrase ‘coming of the Son of Man,’ he wasn’t referring to his second coming.

When Jesus used the words ‘the coming of the Son of Man,’ he seems to have been alluding to Daniel 7:13-14, a text in which the ‘coming’ in question is a **coming to the Ancient of Days in heaven, not a coming from heaven to the earth.**

Rewind: Daniel 7:1-27 begins with a vision of four kingdoms portrayed as four great beasts (usually understood to mean Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome). In verses 9-10, the Ancient of Days is seated on his throne as tens of thousands stand before him. At this point, Daniel tells us, “the court was seated, and the books were opened.” This judgment seems to be at the time of the fourth beast. The little horn from the fourth beast is judged and destroyed in the fire. (The other beasts are also judged but given a stay of execution.)

Then beginning in verse 13, Daniel sees ‘One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven.’ This Son of Man ‘came to the Ancient of Days.’ The Son of Man is given dominion, glory, and a kingdom that shall not be destroyed. The kingdom that is given to ‘One like the Son of Man’ is *also* said to be given to the saints of the Most High (verse 18).

Note: Daniel 7 is a courtroom scene set in heaven. In this courtroom, the kingdoms of the earth are judged. Connected to this heavenly judgment, the One like the Son of Man comes up to the Ancient of Days (**not down to earth**). The dominion that is taken from the earthly beast-kingdoms is given to the One like the Son of Man and to the saints of the Most High. **Daniel 7 does not describe anyone coming from heaven to earth either literally or metaphorically. The ‘coming of the Son of Man’ in the context of Daniel 7 is the coming of the Son of Man up to the throne of God to receive his kingdom.**

So, if the scene pictured in Daniel 7 is the scene to which Jesus alludes when he makes reference to ‘the coming of the Son of Man,’ then the possibility must be kept open that Jesus wasn’t referring to his second advent at all when he used this language. He may have been referring instead to his ascension to the throne of God, his receiving of his kingdom, and the judgment on Jerusalem that would prove he had received the kingdom and was who he said he claimed to be (see Acts 6:11-7:59; Romans 8:34).

Note: In other words, it is possible that Jesus *did* say (in all the passages we examined above which use ‘the coming of the Son of Man’: Matthew 10:23, 16:27-28, and 24:34) that the coming of the Son of Man *would* occur within the lifetime of those who heard him speak, and it *does not* refer to his second coming from heaven to earth.

Matthew 26:64: The time element ('hereafter' literally 'from now on' in the Greek) in this text begins in the present and extends into the indefinite future. If the text is again alluding to Daniel 7:13-14 and Psalm 110:1, then it may very well be referring to Christ's reception of his kingdom at his ascension (Acts 2:32-36) as well as his ongoing task of putting all of his enemies under his feet (1 Corinthians 15:25; Hebrews 10:12-13).

The Already and the Not Yet

The epistles describe the work of redemption in the individual as something that has definitely begun, but has not yet been completed. Like the coming of the kingdom, there is an 'already' and a 'not yet' aspect to individual redemption. It is helpful to see that the New Testament speaks of individual redemption in this way, because this can help us understand what the New Testament means when it speaks of the kingdom of God in similar terms.

- Some verses which describe individual redemption as an accomplished (*already*) fact: Romans 6:2, 5-8; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:4-6; Colossians 1:13; 2:12-13; 1 John 3:14.
- A few texts which teach our individual redemption has *not yet* been completed: Romans 2:13; Galatians 5:5; Philippians 3:12-14.
- Some verses which combine the *already* and *not yet* aspects of individual redemption: 2 Corinthians 1:9-10; Philippians 1:6.
- Some verses which seem to demonstrate a *gradualism* in the *growth* of the kingdom: Daniel 2:34-35, 44-45; Matthew 13:31-33; Mark 4:26-32.

This should help us as believers, to realize that we are truly an *eschatological* people. We are a people separated unto God to live out our lives under *his* reign and to do those things which please our king as citizens of the kingdom of God. We are to live out in the *here and now* those things which *are to come*. We live in that **tension** of the 'already' and the 'not yet.'

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works (Titus 2:11-13).

Finally: Notice that in 1 Corinthians 4:8-13 it would seem Paul is speaking harshly to those who held to some sort of an *over-realized* eschatology.

Summary

In the Gospels we have observed:

1. Jesus saw the kingdom of God as something that was being inaugurated in his ministry.
2. Jesus predicted that judgment was going to fall upon the first-century Jews because of their rejection of him.
3. The passages in the Gospels that refer to 'the coming of the Son of Man' may/may not plausibly be interpreted in a number of ways.
4. Jesus maintains his Hebraic doctrine of bodily resurrection. He is the first to rise from the dead (Acts 26:23), but he is not going to be the last (John 5:24-29; 1 Corinthians 15:20).

Hyper-Preterism and A.D. 70

It's all over. That's it. There ain't no more. And, if you don't expect anything, you'll never be disappointed...

The foundation of all forms of hyper-preterism is the idea that the second coming of Jesus Christ and all of the eschatological events connected with his coming occurred in or around A.D. 70 including the General Resurrection, the Last Judgment, and Satan and death were destroyed. This most fundamental premise of hyper-preterism is unscriptural. Hyper-preterists attempt to defend this position by appealing to certain eschatological 'time texts' in the New Testament, and arguing that Jesus and the apostles clearly taught the Second Coming would occur in the first century.

As we can see just from our basic survey, hyper-preterism is based on a shallow exegesis of the Scriptures. According to hyper-preterists, the only alternative to their position is the liberal rejection of the veracity of Jesus and the apostles. Either the Second Coming occurred in the first century, they say, or Jesus and the apostles were in error.

In insisting on their position, they have been forced to revise and/or reject numerous biblical doctrines. (This brings us back to our discussion of timing *and* nature.) The result of this is not only a **completely different eschatology**, but also a much **different religion**.

Hyper-preterism begins by taking a few biblical texts out of their broader context and interpreting them in a way that only makes sense if you ignore the rest. Then the remainder of Scripture must be forced to fit into that line of interpretation. In fact, the only way to reach the hyper-preterist conclusion is by rejecting the teaching of Jesus and the apostles.

Note: The New Testament teaches that the return of Jesus will be a visible and personal return. The New Testament teaches that the return of Jesus, the General Resurrection, and the Last Judgment are all in the future (our future). This has been the universal confession of the Church since the first century, and if the Church wishes to remain faithful to the teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostles this must always remain the confession of the church.

So, What Really Happened in A.D. 70?

In A.D. 70, the Roman armies that had invaded Israel in response to the Jewish revolt destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. It was an earth-shattering event. Was it unique in the history of the Jews? No. Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed before and other nations had invaded Israel during her history. In fact, some of those conflicts are even described in terms of ‘the end’ (Daniel 8:17).

The destruction of the temple was not simply an event of past history. It was an event which established the final phase of redemptive-history; the new covenant phase of the Church (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Corinthians 3:6). The new covenant has burst the constraints of Israel (Matthew 9:16-17). As the old covenant closed, the new covenant was fully and permanently established with the final removal of the Jewish temple.

Note: The A.D. 70 events are not just ‘big’ events that are really interesting for the study of ancient history; they are big *redemptive-historical* events fundamentally important to the understanding and study of God’s Word.

I think that for the most part, in our reading and study of the Scriptures, we tend to miss this. I know I did at one time. As we understand and appreciate that event from the context of both Scripture’s unfolding of *redemptive* history *and* from the religious history of the Jews, we gain a far deeper insight into its significance. As a *key* moment in the progress of God’s redemptive work in history, Jerusalem’s catastrophic destruction is anticipated everywhere in the New Testament. To miss the significance of A.D. 70 is not just to miss the meaning of an important historical event, but to miss/misunderstand much of the New Testament message.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70 is significant because Jesus prophesied that it would happen. Its fulfillment was further vindication of his claim to be the Messiah and it was *the* demonstration that Jesus had ascended to the right hand of the Father, had received the kingdom, and had been declared both Christ and Lord. **However, rather than judging and overthrowing Israel’s enemies right away, the first nation to be judged under the reign of the Messiah was Israel herself.**

Note: The turning point of redemptive history occurred at the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus around A.D. 30! The events of A.D. 70 were the *repercussions* of what happened at that turning point in A.D. 30.

It's because of this emphasis on, and my growing appreciation for, the redemptive significance of historical events spoken to in the New Testament that I hold to the form of preterism specifically called 'redemptive-historical preterism'. The significance of this approach is not simply that many of the prophecies of the New Testament are past (to us), but that they are *enormously significant* redemptive-historical events that are past. The repercussions of those events *continue* to have great redemptive significance to us and to those who will come after us. They are events that are crucial to the progress of God's redemptive work in history.

As one surveys the Gospel record, Acts, several of the Epistles, and Revelation, it can be seen that the case against unbelieving Israel was being made and was soon to transpire according to the *time frame* references of the passages themselves.

The Puritan Position

If I had to give myself a 'label' I guess I would describe myself as a 'redemptive-historical optimist', one who holds to the 'Puritan view'.

Three Critical Differences Between Then and Now

In modern times the acceptance of three beliefs has inevitably lead to assumptions of how believers view biblical eschatology.

1. In the last one hundred and fifty years the belief has come to hold sway in Protestantism that Christ's Second Advent must precede Israel's conversion and any subsequent blessings of the world. Main-stream Puritan thought did not accept this Pre-millennial view of the Second Advent.

Note: Because of the Puritan rejection of this view, the Puritan position was represented as encouraging the expectation of a 'Christless and kingless millennium'. The acceptance of this false portrayal has resulted in a disinterest and rejection of Puritan teaching.

2. Another influential school of thought has maintained that any general or national conversion of Israel in the future would be inconsistent with the overriding message of the New Testament. There is no longer Jew or Gentile. The perspective of the Gospel is no longer national but spiritual and universal. Israel, geographically and physically considered, no longer has any distinct spiritual significance. God's promises are fulfilled not in the Jewish nation as such but in the believing remnant according to the election of grace.

Such statements are important and valid against any view of Israel's future which supposes she will receive salvation on terms other than those proclaimed in the Gospel, or that she will obtain spiritual privileges distinct from and above those possessed by Gentile Christians.

Note: This was not the Puritan view. Puritans did not believe that there are *any* special and unfulfilled promises made to Israel *apart from the Christian Church*. All they asserted was that it is in no way inconsistent with the New Testament that there should be a great revival in the future, bringing Israel as a mass into the Church and thereby fulfilling God's worldwide saving purpose.

It should be added, that although a number of the Puritans did believe the Jews would be restored to their own country, none supposed that the land of Israel would ever again have the theocratic and symbolic significance which it possessed during the Old Testament era.

3. It is a commonly-accepted belief that the Scriptures teach a steadily worsening world demanding a totally different expectation with regard to the whole period which lies between us and the coming of Christ. Evangelical Christians have long been acclimated to accept this opinion as proven.

"Nothing so unnerves energy and slackens diligence as despondency." – William Jay (1831)

"What we are about to consider will tend to shew that, instead of permitting ourselves to hope for a continued progress of good, we must expect a progress of evil; and that the hope of the earth being filled with the knowledge of the Lord before the exercise of His judgment on the earth, is delusive...Truly Christendom has become completely corrupted; the dispensation of the Gentiles has been found unfaithful: can it be restored? No! impossible.

We are to expect evil, until it becomes so flagrant that it will be necessary for the Lord to judge it...

I am afraid that many a cherished feeling, dear to the children of God, has been shocked this evening; I mean, their hope that the gospel will spread by itself over the whole earth during the actual dispensation". - J. N. Darby in a lecture delivered in Geneva (!) in 1840 on 'Progress of Evil on the Earth,. *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby, Prophetic, vol 1, 471, 483 and 487*

Note: If this assertion is correct then Christ's Church is an institution with no future and the following exposition of Romans 11 must *ipso facto* be wrong!

Romans 11 and the Puritan Hope

It will be good to read Romans 11 (as well as a host of others) and ponder what implications the future of the Jews and the 'fullness of the Gentiles coming in' spoken of in this passage, have to our discussion, and to eschatology. Among many others, this was considered the chief text in defense of the Puritan position. As Murray makes obvious, the Puritans did so, demonstrating that they refused to base their whole redemptive historical understanding on just the one passage in Revelation 20! Again, I believe this makes their position all the stronger. What are the redemptive repercussions of what Paul has written here by the Holy Spirit?

This hope was indeed widespread during the seventeenth century. In the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, after the question, "What do we pray for in the second petition of the Lord's Prayer?" (Thy Kingdom come), answers: "We pray that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed, the gospel propagated throughout the world, the Jews called, the fullness of the Gentiles be brought in...that Christ would rule in our hearts here, and hasten the time of his second coming."

Why was the future of the Jewish people such an important issue in the minds of seventeenth century Christians?

They believed that as Christians they were bound to love and honor the Jews as being the ancient people of God. They were not to hate the Jews only because they were Jews (as many did) but to wish them well and to be in earnest prayer to God for their conversion.

1. A necessary part of Christian piety.
2. Christ came in the flesh through the Jews.
3. The gospel was first preached to them.
4. From the Jews the Gentiles received the gospel.

Note: Their interest in Israel was always set in a wider concern than just a particular interest in the future of that nation; it was Israel's future *within the kingdom of Christ* and the relation between their incoming and the advancement of Christ's glory that was uppermost in their thinking!

J. Marcellus Kik (writing in 1948!), and holding to a belief in their future blessing, states that the idea Israel is to have some unique place in a *future* kingdom of God must be repudiated:

Even in the present time there are some within the Church who simply cannot believe that the old dispensation has been terminated. They still look for a temporal Jewish kingdom whose capital, Jerusalem, will hold sway over all the earth. This was the carnal conception of this kingdom which Christ fought and the apostles opposed, and against which his Church must still fight. It is true that we look forward to the conversion of the

Jewish nation, and that the whole world will be blessed by this conversion. But that is something entirely different from the idea of a temporal Jewish kingdom holding sway over all the nations of the world.

The future of the Jews had real significance for the Puritans because they believed that, even though little is clearly revealed of the purposes of God in history, enough has been given us in Scripture to warrant the great expectation that, with the calling of the Jews, there will come far-reaching blessings for the whole world. **It was a prayerful longing for wider blessing, not just a mere fascination with unfulfilled prophecy, which led them to give such a place to Israel.**

The New Testament Evidence

Matthew 23:38-39 (Matthew 21:9); Luke 21:24. A limit is set to the period during which general judgment will rest upon the Jews. By implication, this suggests a brighter day for them would follow 'being trodden down...until the times of the Gentiles shall be fulfilled.' The words "blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord" reminding us of their greeting and welcome at his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The reference to their future use by the Jews suggests that their long continued hardness as a nation is one day to end.

See also: Acts 1:6-7 and 2 Corinthians 3:15-16.

Romans 11:25-26

Notice that the 'blindness' in verse 25 clearly belongs to Israel as a race. Paul uses the term 'in part' because there was a believing remnant and always has been.

The Questions

- 1. Does the salvation of verse 26 likewise designate a blessing which will belong to the Jewish people as a whole and as a race? Who are the 'all Israel' who shall be saved?**

Some hold that the 'all Israel' who shall be saved refers merely to the sum total of the complete Church, including both Gentile Christians and the remnant of believing Jews. It does not, they say, designate national/racial Israel at some future point in history. This spiritualization of the term 'Israel' *is* used in Scripture this way. (See: Romans 9:6; Galatians 3:29; 6:16.)

There are strong reasons for **not** accepting this interpretation of the word 'Israel' here in verse 26.

The Puritan position was:

- a. It would involve a violent transition from the literal meaning of the term in verse 25 to a spiritual one in verse 26 with no such indication of such a sudden difference of

meaning being introduced. Paul's usage of the term 'Israel' in this whole section is consistent and uniform throughout. In Romans 9-11, the term 'Israel' occurs no less than eleven times. In the preceding ten cases it refers indisputably to the Jews in contrast to the Gentiles. What compelling reason can there be to accept another meaning here? Not the context. The differentiation between Jews and Gentiles does not cease in verse 25 but is continued in the verses which follow!

- b. If the 'all Israel' of verse 26 refers to the final salvation of all believers, Jew and Gentile, why does Paul call it a mystery? What was it that Paul didn't want the Gentiles to be ignorant of? That all the elect would be saved? Where's the mystery there? Or was it that there will be a calling of the Jews into the kingdom of Christ? This is what was in doubt. That the elect will be saved was no secret.

2. Is the salvation of 'all Israel' something that is progressively realized through history?

Does it refer to the complete number of individual Jews who through the centuries have been added to the Church by faith in Christ?

It is/was commonly held that Paul is not speaking about a still-future conversion of the Jews as a nation. He is speaking about the *manner* in which 'all Israel' is saved, not about the *timing*. All through the centuries a portion of elect Jews will escape the continued hardened state of the Jewish nation. This entire Jewish remnant is the 'all Israel' who are to be united with the Gentiles until the last of the Gentiles are saved, that is, the end.

Note: If this view is correct, then Romans 11 gives us no grounds for expecting any saving work of conversion among the Jews surpassing what has yet been seen in history. There is no promise of a great revival among the Jews still to come.

This position was uniformly rejected by exegetes of the Puritan school (also see notes in the Geneva Bible as early as 1560) because the argument must be understood in the wider context of the *whole* of chapter 11:

- a. In verse 1, Paul opens the subject of the cast-off condition of Israel and the problem of how that condition is consistent with the promises and purposes of God.
- b. In verses 2-10, he says it is true that as a body they have fallen but there is a remnant who believes in accordance with God's sovereign determination. The grace of God has prevented the apostasy of Israel being total and universal.
- c. In verse 11, the remaining question of whether God is finished with the Jews collectively as a people is answered. Paul affirms He is not, because the conclusion of God's design in Israel is the salvation of the Gentiles and which is to prompt Israelites to repentance and faith ('provoke them to jealousy').

Note: Grace, not judgment, is God's *ultimate* purpose. Israel's stumbling is made the occasion for salvation coming to the Gentiles. But that's not the end of it!

- d. In verses 12-14, God has further planned the salvation of Israel on a scale which will enrich the Gentiles to such a degree not yet seen!
- e. In verse 15 we see, that beyond Paul's concern for his fellow countrymen, there is a greater end in view because the interests of the Gentiles themselves are bound up with God's design towards Israel.

Note: In verses 12 and 15, the parallel drawn between the 'casting away' or 'rejection' and 'the receiving of them' or 'acceptance' requires the subject to be the same in both instances. The people rejected are the people readmitted. This cannot refer to a believing remnant of Jews!

- f. The remnant of Jewish believers never fell nor was cut off so it cannot be them who will be 'received' and grafted in again (verse 23).

According to the Puritan interpretation, this all points to a vast addition to the Church by Israel's conversion resulting wider blessing for the world. **There is a great revival predicted here!**

3. Is the event of a future general conversion of Israel placed at the very end of history?

First, some take the words 'the fullness of the Gentiles' (verse 25) to mean the conclusion of the kingdom of God in history. 'The fullness' is equated with the complete number of the elect from among the Gentiles. If so, then the salvation of 'all Israel' which goes with it must take place on the verge of eternity and signal the end of Gospel blessing for the world.

Second, some in the past, have taken the expression in verse 15 'what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?' as referring to the physical resurrection of the dead. So taken the verse would prove that the conversion of the Jews must take place at the very end of time.

- a. Paul's use of the word 'fullness' does not necessarily mean 'the sum total'. 'Fulfillment' refers in verse 12 to the large numerical increase of converted Jews and 'fullness' in verse 25 to a large addition of Gentiles (a multitude of the Gentiles). These verses say nothing which requires us to expect no further expansion of the kingdom of Christ thereafter. 'The fullness of the Gentiles' denotes unprecedented blessing for them but does not exclude even greater blessing to follow.
- b. Taking the phrase 'life from the dead' figuratively advances the thought progression of Paul's argument smoothly. Taking it literally in the context of the whole chapter causes more questions than can be answered.

- c. It would seem that if the conversion of the Jews were understood to be any way linked with the resurrection day, the uniform teaching of other parts of Scripture would require some time lapse to occur between the two.
- d. Nowhere else does the phrase 'life from the dead' refer to the physical resurrection. Its closest parallel, 'alive from the dead' (6:13), refers to spiritual life. (See notes in the Geneva Bible on Romans 11:15.)

Note: This belief introduced a new perspective in the Puritan understanding of history. Some retained the view that Romans 11 taught a conversion of the Jews at the end of time, but the main-stream belief became committed to the view above.

One More Issue of Major Significance!

A great part of the differences among Christians over prophecy relates to the interpretation of Old Testament prophecy in the New Testament.

1. Those who insist on what is called the literal principle of interpretation:
 - a. The fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel's future blessing and the world-wide success of Christ's kingdom cannot be in the present age.
 - b. The personal advent of Christ must intervene to introduce a new dispensation.
 - c. Predictions of the Prophets do not apply to the Christian Church in her present form but to a future millennial kingdom.

It's difficult to understand how this opinion can be maintained in light of the New Testament writers' own use of the Old Testament prophecies being spoken of as *already* having a present fulfillment. See: (Hosea 2:23; Isaiah 11:10; 49:8 and Romans 9:26; 15:12; 2 Corinthians 6:2), (Acts 15:14, 16 and Amos 9:11), (Jeremiah 31:31 and Hebrews 8:8), (Galatians 4:26-27 and Isaiah 54:1).

Note: There is no trace of the idea in the prophets to an age of coming blessing referred to as a millennial kingdom introduced by the Second Advent. The literal principle is a dangerously misleading guide to the interpretation of the Prophets. The assertion that the prophecies speaking of 'Zion' or 'Jerusalem' in the Old Testament can refer only to national Israel is ludicrous.

2. Another school of prophetic interpretation argues that there are *no* Old Testament predictions concerning Israel to be fulfilled. The fulfillment has *already* been fulfilled in the Christian Church.

This claim goes too far in light of Paul's use of the Prophets in Romans 11.

3. There is nothing to prevent what has *already* been applied to New Testament converts *also* being applied to the *not yet* future conversion of Israel in history.
 - a. Romans 11:25b-27. Here Paul is quoting Isaiah 59:20 and Jeremiah 31:34.
 - b. Jeremiah 31:34 has both been fulfilled (Hebrews 8:8) and is yet to be fulfilled in a day of greater gospel blessing (Romans 11:27).
 - c. Both Gentile and Jew are thus contained in the same Old Testament predictions, speaking of the *same* salvation.
 - d. A larger fulfillment still awaits the Church when the same covenant faithfulness of God which has *already* brought blessings to the Gentile world *will be* the cause of the removal of Israel's sins.

Note: The way in which Paul employs these texts is proof that the full scope of Old Testament prophecy has not yet been realized in history. This is of major significance! If this is the right lesson to draw from Paul's use of the Prophets in Romans 11 then there is a key given to us for the interpretation of a number of similar Old Testament prophecies. The Puritans saw this clearly and used this key to good effect in their expositions of the Old Testament.

In Summary:

1. The salvation now possessed by a remnant of believing Jews is yet to be enjoyed by far larger numbers of their race.
2. At the time Paul wrote, this was not expected until a considerable number of Gentiles had been evangelized. Their evangelization would hasten the day of Israel's calling.
3. In redemptive history there is a certain relationship appointed by God between Jew and Gentile. Gospel blessing came to the world by Israel's fall and a yet greater blessing will result from her conversion.
4. The end of this world shall not come until the Jews are called, and how long after that no one knows. Nothing in Romans 11 tells us.
5. The quotations from Isaiah and Jeremiah, confirming Paul's teaching, indicate that the full extent of gospel blessing predicted by the Prophets is yet to be realized!

A Question of Whether It Will Be Cataclysmic, Naturalistic, or by Revival

The case for the Puritan Hope is very well put forth by Iain Murray and can be summarized as:

If the calling of the Jews and a wider conversion work in the world is to occur without such cataclysmic acts as the personal descent of Christ and the resurrection of saints, by what means will these blessings be brought to pass? The answer of the main Puritan school became a most important part of the heritage they left to posterity. It was that the kingdom of Christ would spread and triumph through the powerful operations of the Holy Spirit poured out upon the Church in revivals. Such periods would come at the command of Christ, for new Pentecosts would show him still to be 'both Lord and Christ'. Their whole Calvinistic theology of the gospel, with its emphasis on the power given to Christ as Mediator for the sure in-gathering of the vast number of his elect, and on the person of the Holy Spirit as the One by whom the dead are quickened, dovetails in here. They rejected altogether a naturalistic view of inevitable progress in history – so common in the nineteenth century - but asserted that the sovereign purpose of God in the gospel, as indicated by the promises of Scripture yet unfulfilled, points to the sure hope of great outpourings of the Spirit in the future. It was upon such central beliefs as these that the Puritans based their expectations. Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy*, p 51

The Prospect in History: Christ Our Hope

If hope is to be regained today, upon what grounds can it be built?

If there is any lesson to be learned it must be remembered that:

- 1. First and foremost, revivals are as a result of the efficacious work of the Holy Spirit.**
- 2. Revivals come only through the preaching of scriptural truth.**
- 3. Primary importance, therefore, must be placed on the need for preachers and missionaries to be thoroughly grounded in the doctrines of Scripture with true heartfelt zeal for sound theology.**
- 4. We must long prayerfully for the salvation of souls and that God will recall the Church to her ministry in the world to the gospel of Christ.**
- 5. Commitment and continued diligence must be given to long range goals and support of reaching all the nations to the glory of Christ and the promotion of his world-wide kingdom.**

6. If hope is to be regained today it can only be as faith is restored in the scriptural revelation of the Person of Christ.

“The fullness of Jesus is not changed, then why are our works so feebly done? Pentecost, is that to be a tradition? The reforming days, are these to be memories only? I see no reason why we should not have a greater Pentecost than Peter saw, and a Reformation deeper in its foundations, and truer in its upbuildings than all the reforms which Luther or Calvin achieved. We have the same Christ, remember that. The times are altered, but Jesus is the Eternal, and time touches him not...Our laziness puts off the work of conquest, our self-indulgence procrastinates, our cowardice and want of faith make us dote upon the millennium instead of hearing the Spirit’s voice today. Happy days would begin from this hour if the Church would but awake and put on her strength, for in her Lord all fullness dwells.” – C. H. Spurgeon

Have we as the modern Church lost sight of who our Lord is and become far too spiritually ‘shortsighted’?

Pray for Israel.

Note: Although the Puritan view and the postmillennial view may seem very much the same thing, it has been a mistake to treat as synonymous the Puritan and postmillennial views of unfulfilled prophecy. In the past, these differences were matters of **emphases** and *how* the kingdom of God on earth is accomplished (how and to what extent the kingdom of God on earth will be victorious). Postmillennialism has picked up (fairly or not) much unfortunate “baggage” from liberalism and Darwinistic naturalism (at least gained that reputation) in its past with emphases apart from *God’s* sovereign working out *how* the kingdom will be manifested in history. Again, it is not just a manner of timing but of nature. I greatly appreciate the effective job Gentry and Mathison have done in correcting misconceptions and misguided approaches/emphases by others, *and* have led the defense against hyper-preterism, **as postmillennialists**. In my study I’ve become convinced that, because of their work, postmillennialism may come to be seen as even more in line with the “Puritan Hope.”