



## Week 2

# Historic Premillennialism

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# READING THE BOOK OF REVELATION, SESSION TWO

## *Historic Premillennialism*

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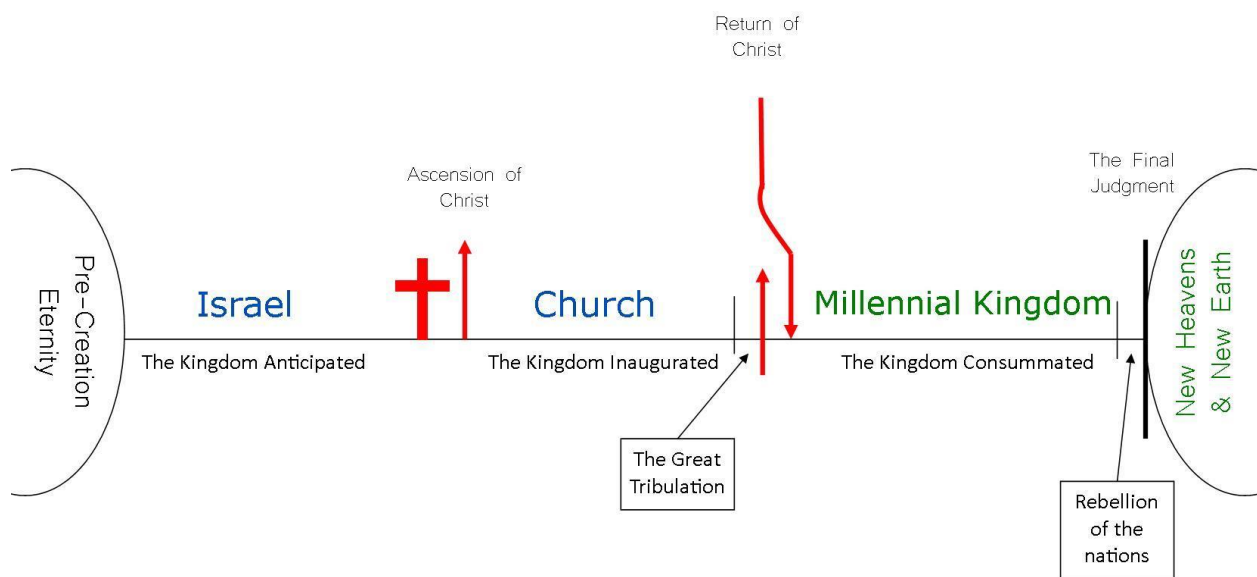
The early church left for us a clear statement on what orthodox, Bible-believing Christians agree about the end times. It is a sentence which is found in the Nicene Creed from 381 AD.

*“He [Jesus Christ] will come again in glory to judge the living and dead and his kingdom will have no end.”* (Nicene Creed)

All acceptable Christian teaching must fall in line with this statement: 1) Jesus Christ will return; 2) in his glorified, resurrected, immortal human body; 3) to bring final judgment on all people; and 4) to establish the eternal kingdom of God. The view we want to look at tonight is in line with this statement.

Tonight, we will consider *Historic Premillennialism* which may also be referred to as *Post-Tribulational Premillennialism*, *Covenantal Premillennialism*, or *Chiliasm* (from the Greek word for one thousand). Premillennialism is the belief that there will be an earthly kingdom of Christ and his people on the earth before the conclusion of history and the creation of the new heavens and the new earth. This view has the distinction of being the oldest known understanding of the “thousand years” described in Revelation 20 – it was taught by a number of early church fathers in the second half of the second century (150–200 AD), including Irenaeus, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, and Papias. The fact that we know of this view very early in the history of the Christian movement does not, however, make it correct. We know very little about the Christian movement during the second century and the writings we possess do not contain developed information about their theological views – whenever Christians are a tiny minority and under extreme persecution they don’t spend their time writing theological essays! As a result, we can’t identify what views were even in existence about the end times. Since, we first hear of Amillennialism at the beginning of third century, it also must have been present at an early point.

Again, the following diagram pictures the Historic Premillennial scheme:



The Premillennial viewpoint teaches that, during this age and before the end of this age, Jesus Christ will return to this earth and reign in an earthly kingdom. During his kingdom reign, the

conditions of life will be greatly enhanced, especially in terms of longevity of life and of health and freedom from demonic influence. Even though the millennium is only described in Revelation 20, Premillennialists note that there are many passages in the Old Testament that describe kingdom conditions that fall short of the eternal state.<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand how an Historic Premillennialist reads the book of Revelation, we need to consider some basic interpretational ideas. Each of these underline a distinctive understanding of a topic or passage that differs from other approaches

## Revelation 1.19 and the Structure of the Book

Most interpreters regard Rev. 1.19 as having some significance for the way the book unfolds its message. Unfortunately, though the verse is quite simple, it is not clear exactly what it means because it could be understood grammatically in two different ways. How a person understands this verse will determine to a large degree their approach to the book. Here is a “first-reading” view of the verse. A first-reading view is the first thing that comes to mind, when you read or hear something; your first-reading view must be tested to determine if it is correct:

“Write therefore the things that you have seen and (*kai*) the things that are and (*kai*) the things that will happen after this.”

It is commonly thought that this verse gives the outline of the book: John is told to write down:

1. Past: The things that you have seen (1.1–18);
2. Present: And the things that are at the present time (1.19–3.22);
3. Future: And the things that will happen in the future (4.1–22.21)

We must note, however, that the word *kai* is the Greek connective (like our ‘and’) but it is not an exact equivalent to ‘and’ because 1) it is used much more frequently, so frequently that it must often be left out in translation, and because 2) in sentences that have ‘*kai*...*kai*...’ it can mean ‘both...and...’<sup>2</sup>

The Historic Premillennialist translates this verse as follows:

“Write, therefore, the things you have seen, both the things that are and the things that will happen after this.” (ESV, NIV)

“The things you have seen” refer not just to Rev. 1.1–18 but to the whole book; this is a restatement of John’s commission in 1.1–3 to reduce all that is revealed to him to writing. He is told that the content of the visions will concern both the present and the future. Thus, this verse is not so much an outline of the book as it is a description of the contents of the book.

According to this view, the entire book is a mixture of the present and the future. Though the letters to the seven churches (chapters 2–3) are mostly about the present state of the churches during the time between the first and second appearances of Christ, even those letters contain words of warning and promise to be fulfilled in the future at the return of Christ (for example, 2.7). Chapters 6–20 are *primarily* about the future time of tribulation and wrath that precede the return of Christ. In these chapters, however, there are frequent words of encouragement to Christian readers of any generation (for example, 13.10b, 18; 14.12; 16.15). Even the past is included, for example in the recapitulation of redemptive history in 12.1–6, where Israel

<sup>1</sup> For example, Isa. 65–66. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (1994, Zondervan), pages 1127–1130.

<sup>2</sup> Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker. *A Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (1958, University of Chicago Press), under the word “*kai*,” Section I.6, page 393.

produces the Redeemer who is then opposed by Satan. We should note, however, that the past, is only reported in order to bring the reader to the present. So the content of the book is primarily about the *present* and the *future*.

Though the primary focus of the book is the end of the age and the return of Christ, *it must have relevance to every generation of Christian readers*. It was not written simply to give us a blueprint to the “end times” because in that case there could only be one generation who would benefit from it. In fact, a careful reading of the book shows that much of what was revealed is expressed in terms that were easily understandable to first-century readers – for example, “lampstand,” 1.20; “horse’s bridle,” 14.20; even Armageddon as a battle of foot soldiers and cavalry. John notes in the beginning of the book that he is a “partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance in Jesus” with those Christians to whom he is writing in the seven churches (1.9). While the final generation may experience the “great tribulation” (see below), Christians of every generation experience tribulation and are in the need of the exhortations of the book.

## Israel and the Church

In the Old Testament, the people of God are called the “children of Israel,” that is the descendants of Jacob who was renamed Israel (Gen. 32.28; Exod. 1.1–4). In the New Testament, the people of God is made up of individuals drawn from every people group on earth and brought through faith into the body of Christ, called “the church.” The relationship between Israel and the church can be understood in different ways. The understanding of their relationship will determine to a great extent how one understands the book of Revelation.

There are three ways of understanding the relationship between Israel and the church:

1. *Israel and the Church are distinct*: Dispensationalism teaches that ‘Israel’ refers to God’s Old Testament people, the physical descendants of Jacob. The Church refers God’s New Testament people, drawn mostly from the Gentiles. God has a different purpose and program for each.
2. *Israel is completed in the Church*: Historic Premillennialists and some Amillennialists teach that Israel, the Old Testament people of God, was intended to be *completed* in the Church which is made up of Jews and Gentiles together in one body.
3. *Israel is replaced by the Church*: some Amillennialists teach that because Israel failed in their commission to be the means of blessing to the earth, God set them aside and replaced them with the Church.

Let’s look more deeply at how Historic Premillennialism understands the relationship between Israel and the Church.<sup>3</sup> What do we mean by this idea that Israel completes the Church?

In the promise given to Abraham, which marks a key point in redemptive history, Abraham is promised numerous descendants (“seed,” or “offspring”). From the beginning, God’s purpose included the intention that “in you (or, “in your offspring,” Gen 22.18) all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12.3). *From the outset, it was God’s intention to bring blessing to the entire world through the offspring of Abraham.*

As we read the Bible, we find that Abraham has four different “offspring.”

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<sup>3</sup> The first and third views will be explained more fully when we look at Dispensational Premillennialism and Amillennialism.

- Unbelieving physical descendants: Offspring who do not share his faith in the promise-making and justifying God (most of the Israelites in the Old Testament would be part of this *nominal Israel*);
- Believing physical descendants: Offspring who *do* share his faith (*true Israel*).
- Jesus Christ, who is *the* “offspring” (singular) through whom all of the promises are fulfilled (Gal. 3.16);
- Spiritual descendants: All those Gentiles who, by sharing Abraham’s faith in the promise-fulfiller, Jesus Christ, are his spiritual offspring even though they are not physical descendants (Gal. 3.7–9). Along with believing Israelites, these are called the *Israel of God* in Gal. 6.16.

Two important things must be noted about the “offspring of Abraham.”

First, Abraham’s physical descendants who did not share his faith were a part of the covenant community under the old covenant; they were “the children of Israel” even though they did not have a saving relationship with the Lord of the covenant. It was necessary for the physical offspring of Abraham to maintain their ethnic integrity because the Redeemer was promised to come through them. But the promises were *not* made to the physical offspring of Abraham who did not share his faith. Unbelieving people will not share in the fulfillment of the promises. All the promises are made only to believing, obedient people of God.

Second, what we find in the Bible is that there is only one people of God made up of the “offspring of Abraham.” The people of God have always included both believing Jews and believing Gentiles.

- In the Old Testament, the people of God were made up *primarily* of Abraham’s physical offspring *along with* those Gentiles who identified with the holy nation and kept the law. Within the ‘covenant nation,’ only those who believed in the justifying God of Abraham constituted true Israel. Later in their history, this group was called “the remnant” (for example, 2 Chron. 30.6; Ezra 9.8, 13–15; Isa. 11.11; 37.31).
- In the New Testament, the people of God are made up *primarily* of Abraham’s spiritual offspring who believe in Jesus Christ along with those physical descendants of Abraham who join with them through faith in Christ (see, for example, Rom. 2.28–29; 9.6–8; 11.11–24; Gal. 3.7–9; 25–29; Eph. 2.11–22).

Though the composition of the people of God differs under the old and new covenants in terms of the proportion of Jews and Gentiles, *there is only one people of God made up of all of the believing “offspring of Abraham.”*

Why is this important? There were no promises given to Israel as an ethnic group, merely because of their physical descent from Abraham (Rom. 2.28–29; 9.6–8). The promises were given to believing Israel as the people of God. And promises given to the people of God in the Old Testament are the possession of the people of God under in the New Testament.

Thus, the Church as the *completion* of “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6.16); these are the people of God who are described in the book of Revelation. When it comes to the fulfillment of the promises, there is no longer a distinction between believing Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2.11–22).

Why is this important? Because the dispensationalist argues that there is a distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles that continues. The Church is raptured and removed from the earth so

that God can deal with Israel in Revelation 4–16. But, according to the Historic Premillennialist, there is no such distinction. In the book of Revelation, all of the “people of God” who are alive at the point the great tribulation begins will go through that tribulation.

## The Return of Christ and the “Rapture”

Many Americans are aware of the teaching about the ‘Rapture.’ This is the idea that there will be a secret ‘snatching away’ of all true believers from the earth to heaven before the beginning of the great tribulation. Few people are aware that this is a relatively recent teaching about the end times. It is not the understanding of either Historic Premillennialism or of Amillennialism.

The Historic Premillennialist notes that a straightforward reading of Jesus’ teaching about the end times (Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21), clearly indicates only one return of Christ. In fact, after Jesus notes that there will be a great tribulation, he says,

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and 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.” (Matt. 24.29–30)

They note that the return of Christ, as he described it, will be *public*, *visible* to all, and *dramatic*. There no secret about it.

Later, Paul speaks of the return of Christ in 1 Thessalonians 4:

“<sup>13</sup>But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. <sup>14</sup>For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. <sup>15</sup>For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup>For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup>Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. <sup>18</sup>Therefore encourage one another with these words.” (1 Thess. 4.13–18)

It appears that some of the Christians in Thessalonica were troubled by the fact that some of their number had died and they worried that they might miss Christ’s return. Paul wrote to assure them that that all believers, both the living and the dead will be raised at Christ’s return. The word ‘rapture’ comes from the Latin translation of the New Testament which uses the word *rapiō* to translate the words ‘caught up’ in verse 17. (It is not the English word ‘rapture’ which refers to “a feeling of intense pleasure or joy”!)

This ‘catching up’ is not the central teaching of the passage; it is merely the word used to describe what will happen to believers when Christ returns: at that point all *dead* believers will be raised and their spirits/souls (presently with God in heaven) will be reunited to their transformed, glorified resurrection bodies; all *living* believers will be ‘caught up’ and (presumably) at that point will be immediately transformed into their resurrection bodies and united with those who went before. Then, we all will be together with the Lord.

Historic Premillennialists note that the Greek word translated “to meet” the Lord in the air is the word *apantēsis*. This was the word used in Greek literature to describe the nobles of a city going out to meet a visiting dignitary and then escorting him back into the city.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Paul is describing believers meeting the Lord in the air and then returning with him to the earth to begin his millennial reign. There is nothing in the passage that implies or requires that this return be secret or that, when believers are caught up, they then go with Christ to heaven during the tribulation in order to return with him at the conclusion of the tribulation.

If you ask an Historic Premillennialist if he or she believes in the rapture, the answer will be “Yes, there is a ‘catching up’ of believers at the second coming of Christ,” but “No, there is not *secret* removal of Christians from the earth.” Christ will return only one time.

You must note that this view goes along with their understanding of the church and Israel as we saw earlier. Since Historic Premillennialists hold to a form of covenant theology, they believe that there is only one people of God made up of both Israel and the church. Most of them hold the view that there is still a place for “ethnic Israel” (the physical descendants of Abraham through Jacob) in God’s purposes because they believe that Romans 9–11 teaches that there will be a large-scale conversion of Jewish people to belief in Jesus as the Messiah before the return of Christ (see especially Romans 11.25–32). But at that point, they will not remain separate from Gentile believers; rather they will be incorporated into the church which is the fulfillment of Israel and is called “the Israel of God” in Galatians 6.16.

In other words, according to Historic Premillennialism, there is no need for Israel to experience the tribulation as a punishment for breaking the old covenant – that punishment was complete with the exile which began in 505 BC. Rather, all of the people of God will go through the tribulation which will involve both God’s wrath on the unbelieving and his protection of his people through that wrath and from the persecution of the world system as it seeks to destroy them.

## Daniel’s Seventieth Week and the “Great Tribulation”

One of the most difficult concepts to grasp is what is often called the ‘great tribulation.’ It is evident from the New Testament that tribulation (or the experience of difficulty as a result of being and living as a Christian) is the experience of believers of all ages in a fallen world. The book of Revelation, at least in the premillennial view, speaks of a future time of tribulation that is called in one place ‘the great tribulation’ (Rev. 7.14), and this seems to be a heightened time of difficulty for believers in the end times.

The view of Dispensational Premillennialism, which we will look at in depth next time, teaches some very specific things about the great tribulation that it draws from Daniel 9.24–27. The other views don’t draw the same conclusions and it makes quite a difference in how you understand the book. In order to understand how an Historic Premillennialist understands the topic, you have to first see what dispensationalists say.

So, let’s start with a look at the passage itself:

<sup>24</sup> “Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Erik Peterson, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. G. Kittel), under the word “*apantēsis*” (1964–76, Eerdmans), 1:320. Moulton & Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (1914–29, Hodder & Stoughton), page 53.

Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks. It shall be built again<sup>5</sup> with squares and moat, but in a troubled time.<sup>26</sup> And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed.<sup>27</sup> And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator.”

This is an incredibly difficult passage and the views of it are almost endless. I have almost despaired of trying to teach anything about this in this series because the hearer can instantly become confused in trying to grasp the different views. However, it is central to the debate about the meaning of the book of Revelation. So what I have decided to do is to present it briefly – just the conclusions – and put on the website a paper I wrote in preparing this entitled, “Daniel’s Seventieth Week” which is about eight pages long. Anyone who wants to get a better grasp of the views can read that.<sup>6</sup>

In the passage, Daniel wants to know when the exile is going to end. Jeremiah said that it would last seventy years (Jer. 25). Daniel, in exile in Babylon wants to know when that seventy years began and when it will end. An angel is sent by God to answer his question but he answers the more important question (from the perspective of redemptive history): When will the people’s hearts be returned to the Lord? This, he says, is going to take “seventy weeks” which most interpreters understand to be weeks of years, in other words, 70 x 7 years, or 490 years.

In verse 25, the passage then speaks of seven “weeks” (49 years), and 62 “weeks” (434 years), which is sixty-nine “weeks” or 483 years. These years take you to the time of the Messiah according to verses 25 and 26. Up to this point, there is general agreement.

Then, says the dispensational view, there is a break or parenthesis which is called “the church age.” The seventieth week is left for a future time; it picks up in verse 26b: “And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator.” This, they say, is referring to the great tribulation and the rise of the antichrist. Thus, Daniel’s seventieth week is “missing” in Daniel – at least in the sense that it’s not fulfilled after the conclusion of the sixty-nine weeks as we would expect.

The Historic Premillennialist understands this prophecy as a prediction of a literal time-period with an identifiable beginning and ending. The “seventy weeks” begin in verse 25 and ends in verse 27. So, they interpret Daniel 9.24–27 as follows:<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I have reproduced the marginal reading in the ESV for verse 25. It is commonly thought that, after the beginning of the Christian movement, there was an intentional change made to the standard Masoretic (Hebrew) text at this point. This was done in order to counteract the common Christian interpretation of this text. See Peter J. Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant* (2012, Crossway), page 538.

<sup>6</sup> For a good overview, the notes in the *ESV Study Bible* on Daniel 9.24–27 are very helpful.

<sup>7</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (2002, Baker Academic), page 414. Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (2013, Baker Academic), pages 394–95.



- Verse 24 refers to the establishment of the new covenant which was brought about by the death and resurrection of Christ in 33 AD. This is the same event as the ‘return of the hearts of the people to the Lord’ predicted by the prophets (for example, Mal. 4.6). All of these events were fulfilled in the first century and in the new covenant.
- Verse 25: The words, “from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem” refers to 457 BC when Artaxerxes commissioned Ezra the priest to return to Jerusalem to teach the people in order to more securely establish the city. (Ezra 7.11–26). Using standard solar years, you subtract 483 years from 457 BC which brings you to 27 AD, which is the approximate time of the beginning of Christ’s ministry.
- Verse 26: The ‘seventieth week’ would normally be thought of as running from 27–34 AD and would include (at least), Christ’s ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection. Verse 26, however, includes the destruction of the temple in 70 AD by the Romans. Note, however, that verse 26 starts with the words “after the sixty-[nine] weeks” – meaning *after 27 AD*, so it allows for the seventieth week to include other events beyond a seven-year period.
- Verses 25–27: Many Historic Premillennialists understand the Messiah to be the subject throughout these verses until the end of verse 27. He is “an anointed one, a prince” (v. 25), “an anointed one” (v. 26), “the prince who is to come” (v. 26, the “people of the prince” refers to the Jews), and the “he” who “shall make a strong covenant with many” (v. 27, meaning the new covenant), and who “shall put an end to sacrifice and offering” (v. 27, meaning by his death).
- Verse 27: The last sentence of this verse refers to an adversary of God and his people – “the desolator.” It most likely refers primarily to Titus, the Roman General and son of the Roman Emperor Vespasian. Titus, who later became the emperor Titus, led the army in the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. They refer, however, to the concept of *sensus plenior* (Latin for “full meaning”) to explain how an event may have a single meaning at the point a prophecy was made but be shown to have a fuller, divinely-intended meaning later in redemptive history.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the Roman general Titus is the precursor of the final adversary of God, the antichrist, who appears before the return of Christ.

From statements of Jesus (Matt. 24; Mark 13) and from the book of Revelation (Rev. 6–16), the Historic Premillennialist believes there will be a time of great tribulation before the return of Christ. They do not, however, identify this period as lasting seven years or as focusing exclusively on ethnic Israel. They believe this ‘great tribulation’ will be the final conclusion of the general ‘tribulation’ for God’s people that characterizes the church age. In sum, Daniel 9 is a prediction about the establishment of the new covenant and was fulfilled in the New Testament; it does not figure directly in the book of Revelation.

## Revelation 20 and the “Thousand Years”

The idea that at least some of the saints will reign with the Messiah is found throughout the Bible (for example, Dan. 7.27; Matt. 19.28; 2 Tim. 2.12; Rev. 5.10). The time and location of this reign, however, is only made clear in Revelation 20.1–6:

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<sup>8</sup> When Matthew quotes God’s statement in the prophet Hosea, “Out of Egypt I have called my son” (Hos. 11.1) and applies them to Jesus in Matthew 2.14, it is an obvious example of *sensus plenior*. Today, the word “typology” is used to describe this.

“<sup>1</sup> Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. <sup>2</sup> And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, <sup>3</sup> and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

“<sup>4</sup> Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. <sup>5</sup> The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. <sup>6</sup> Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.”

Let's walk through the passage and see how Historic Premillennialism interprets the key words and phrases in these two paragraphs in order to understand their view of the millennial kingdom.

- vv 1–3: **The binding of Satan:** Though Jesus bound ‘the strong man’ (meaning Satan) during his earthly ministry (Mark 3.27), that cannot be what is referred to in this verse. In Revelation 20, Satan is not just *restrained* but is *completely imprisoned* and made powerless so that he has no power over the nations. That is evidently not the case during the present age, since at present Satan “has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4.4). This verse is pointing toward a future fulfillment after the return of Christ and during the millennial kingdom.
- v 3: **‘until the thousand years are ended’:** The imprisonment of Satan means that during the millennial kingdom, he will not be able to actively deceive people. Those unbelievers who survive the great tribulation will enter the kingdom in their earthly bodies; that means that the influence of the “world” and the “flesh” will still be present. Not provoked by the devil, however, the impact of sin will be greatly curtailed. Thus, the millennial kingdom will be a time of relative peace and prosperity. Under the reign of Christ, most of the world’s inhabitants will become believers. At the end of the kingdom, Satan will be released and incite a rebellion, but this time it will be ended by the direct action of God (see verses 7–10).
- v 4: **‘I saw those to whom the authority to judge was committed.... Also...the souls of the [martyrs]’:** This is a difficult verse for all viewpoints because it is unclear whether the first clause (“those to whom authority to judge was committed”) and the second clause “the souls of those who had been beheaded” during the tribulation) are referring to one or two groups. It seems that, in the larger context, all believers participate in the kingdom reign, since they are referred to in verse 9. Most Premillennialists take this to refer to either all saints (v 4a) with special attention to martyrs (v 4b), or (conversely), to all martyrs (v 4), which in the context represent all believers.
- v 4: **‘they came to life’.** Historic Premillennialists regard this word as the key to the passage. The word translated ‘came to life’ (*ezēsan*) refers to resurrection from the dead both in the immediate context (v. 5, “first resurrection”) as well as throughout the New Testa-

ment (see, for example, Matt. 9.18; Jn 11.25; Rom. 14.19). This means that the raising of dead believers occurs at the return of Christ and before the millennial kingdom.

- vv 5–6 **‘first resurrection’**: Historic Premillennialists believe that this is the promised resurrection of all believers at the return of Christ. They note that if, as Dispensational Premillennialism teaches, the church-age believers have already been raised secretly before the tribulation, this would only be a resurrection of tribulation martyrs and cannot be the *first* resurrection.
- v 4: **‘They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years’**: Note that the thousand years is also referred to in verses 2, 3, 5, and 6. Historic Premillennialists acknowledge that numbers are frequently used symbolically in the book of Revelation, especially the numbers seven, ten, and twelve. One thousand is ten (a number indicating completeness or wholeness) squared. Thus, most Historic Premillennialists do not feel it is necessary to interpret the thousand years literally as one thousand literal solar years. It is a symbolic number of completeness and longevity, not necessarily one-thousand years in length. Note that few are willing to argue the point; they are more concerned that the millennium be understood to a reign of Christ and the saints on the unrenewed, though enhanced, earth before the final judgment.

Revelation 20 is the only passage in the Bible that clearly specifies the time and location of the earthly kingdom of the Messiah – it is on this earth and during this age. When Christ returns to establish his kingdom, Satan is imprisoned in such a way that he is unable to deceive people. At his return, Jesus also raises all those who have died in persevering faith from any age, including a special focus on those who endured through the great tribulation. For a thousand years, Christ and his people rule over the people of the earth who remained alive at the conclusion of the tribulation. During this time, sin is still present but, without the influence of Satan, its power is greatly weakened. The conditions of the earth are enhanced, there is greater length of life, though believing people still die and are resurrected to share in Christ’s reign.

After a long period of Christ’s rule, Satan is released for a short time. He again deceives the nations bringing about a rebellion against the rule of Christ and the saints. At this point, God destroys the rebellion, brings final judgment on all who have ever lived, and establishes new heavens and a new earth.

## Conclusion

Let’s conclude by noting some of the strengths and weaknesses of Historic Premillennialism.

### Strengths

1. Historic Premillennialism provides an internally consistent way of reading the book, *based on it’s interpretation of other relevant passages* and topics, like the return of Christ and the great tribulation. They have a more natural reading of these topics including their understanding of Daniel 9 and the “great tribulation,” the meaning of “catching up” (rapture) in 1 Thess. 4, and the relationship of Israel and the Church.
2. It provides a relatively straight-forward reading of Revelation 20 about the millennial kingdom preceding the final judgment and new heavens and new earth.

### Weaknesses

1. Historic Premillennialism has more difficulty explaining why there needs to be an earthly kingdom of Christ. According to Amillennialism, there isn’t a need since there was

already a (failed) earthly kingdom in the Old Testament under David and his descendants. According to Dispensational Premillennialism, the millennium will fulfill promises God made to Israel in the Old Testament that remain unfulfilled. The Historic Premillennialist should answer be that it is the fulfillment on this earth of the creation mandate of Genesis 1.26–28 that humans are to “have dominion” over the earth. This is fulfilled when Christ, as the representative Man rules over the earth in the millennial kingdom.

2. Historic Premillennialism has trouble with the idea that Christ could return at any moment (“imminency”). Dispensationalism answers this by the idea of a “secret rapture” that could happen at any time. Some Amillennialists answer this by their belief that the “great tribulation” refers to the whole church age so that all of the signs are being fulfilled. We must note, however, that all views have difficulty explaining how passages that imply Christ can return at any moment (for example, Matt. 24.50; 1 Thess. 5.2; Jas. 5.7–9) relate to those that seem to indicate certain signs must be fulfilled before he returns (for example, Matt. 24.14; Mark 13.24–25; 2 Thess. 2.1–10).

## Resources

### *Books*

Erikson, Millard. *Contemporary Options in Eschatology: A Study of the Millennium* (1977, Baker), 197 pages.

Ladd, George Eldon. *The Presence of the Future, Revised Edition* (1974, Eerdmans), 370 pages.

### *Commentaries*

Beasley-Murray, *The Revelation*, in the one-volume *New Bible Commentary: Revised* (1970, Inter-Varsity Press), 31 pages.

Ladd, George Eldon. *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (1972, Eerdmans), 308 pages.

Mounce, Robert H. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Revelation* (1977, Eerdmans), 426 pages.

Osborne, Grant. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Revelation* (2002, Baker), 869 pages.

# Outline of the Book of Revelation

## (Historic Premillennial View)

### **I. (1.1–8) Introduction**

#### A. (1.1–3) Prologue

1. (1.1) The book is a revelation of impending events given to John by Jesus Christ through an intermediary angel.
2. (1.2) John has faithfully recorded this testimony for Christ.
3. (1.3) The reader and hearers of this prophecy are blessed.

#### B. (1.4–8) Greetings

1. (1.4–5a) John writes to the seven churches of Asia Minor with benediction from the eternal God, the bountiful Holy Spirit, and the crucified and triumphant Messiah.
2. (1.5b–6) John praises Jesus for his redemption and for elevating his people to royalty and priesthood.
3. (1.7) The prophets foretold Jesus' triumphant appearance in judgment.
4. (1.8) God announces his eternity and sovereignty as an introduction to the message of judgment.

### **II. (1.9 – 3.22) First Vision: Christ Judges the Church**

#### A. (1.9–20) John's vision of Christ

1. (1.9–11) While exiled to the island of Patmos for his faithful proclamation of the gospel, John is granted a vision of messages to send to the seven churches.
2. (1.12–18) In his vision John sees Christ in glory among the seven churches who assures John of his sovereignty over the future.
3. (1.19–20) Christ commands John to record the contents of his vision(s) which concern the present and the future.

#### B. (2.1 – 3.22) Messages to the Seven churches of Asia

1. (2.1–7) Message to the church of Ephesus: "You have lost your first love... repent and do your first works."
2. (2.8–11) Message to the church of Smyrna: "Endure persecution even to martyrdom and I will give you the crown of life."
3. (2.12–17) Message to the church of Pergamum: "Repent of immorality or I will discipline you."
4. (2.18–29) Message to the church of Thyatira: "Reject the idolatrous from your midst and hold on to your faithfulness."
5. (3.1–6) Message to the church of Sardis: "Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die...I will come like a thief."
6. (3.7–13) Message to the church of Philadelphia: "Because of your faithfulness I will preserve you during the coming time of trial."
7. (3.14–22) Message to the church of Laodicea: "Repent of your self-sufficiency and seek fellowship with me."

### III.(4.1 – 16.21) Second Vision: Christ in Heaven Judging the Earth

- A. (4.1–5.14) In a vision, John sees through an ‘open door,’ as the heavenly throne room prepares for the opening of the seven seals starting the period of tribulation on the earth.
  - 1. (4.1–11) The praise of God the Creator at the heavenly throne.
  - 2. (5.1–14) The praise of the conquering Lamb-Redeemer for his worthiness to bring judgment on the earth.
- B. (6.1–17) The great tribulation begins with the opening of six of the seals representing judgments from God on an ungodly world.
  - 1. (6.1–2) The white horse: Conquest
  - 2. (6.3–4) The red horse: Internal Strife
  - 3. (6.5–6) The black horse: Scarcity
  - 4. (6.7–8) The pale horse: Death by violence, famine, disease, and wild beasts
  - 5. (6.9–11) The martyrs under the altar cry for vindication
  - 6. (6.12–17) Astronomical and geographical portents of final judgment
- C. (7.1–17) **PARENTHESIS:** The vision of the two multitudes between the sixth and seventh seals pictures the security of believers through tribulation until the consummation.
  - 1. (7.1–3) Before proceeding with the seventh seal, people of God are presented in ideal and symbolic terms as a new or re-constituted Israel, the “Israel of God” (Gal. 6.16) and are sealed on their foreheads to protect them through the great tribulation.
  - 2. (7.9–17) The people of God of all places and ages, pictured as a multitude before the throne, are assured that they will emerge victorious in the consummation.
- D. (8.1–9.21) The opening of the seventh seal, leads to the sounding of the first six trumpets, which depict further judgments from God on the earth-dwellers.
  - 1. (7.6–7) First Trumpet: Hail and fire destroy 1/3 of plant life
  - 2. (8.8–9) Second Trumpet: Burning Mountain destroys 1/3 of sea life
  - 3. (8.10–11) Third Trumpet: Falling star poisons 1/3 of drinking water
  - 4. (8.12) Fourth Trumpet: 1/3 of heavenly bodies dimmed
  - 5. (8.13) An angel announces that the last three trumpets are very severe in effect.
  - 6. (9.1–11) Fifth Trumpet: Demonic locusts inflict a five-month wound
  - 7. (9.12–19) Sixth Trumpet: Demonic troops kill 1/3 of mankind
  - 8. (9.20–21) Parenthetical note: Even with these judgments humans refuse to repent
- E. (10.1–11.19) **PARENTHESIS** between the Sixth and Seventh Trumpets
  - 1. (10.1–11) John sees an angel with a little scroll who announces that the Seventh Trumpet will bring in the final judgment. The scroll is the message of vindication and judgment John is to proclaim about the future.
  - 2. (11.1–14) John is told of the two witnesses who will prophesy in/from Jerusalem for 3 1/2 years.
  - 3. (11.15–19) the Seventh Trumpet ushers in the consummation.
- F. (12.1–14.20) **PARENTHESIS:** World history is viewed through the allegory of a cosmic battle between God and Satan, worked out on the earth, in which God’s persecuted and

martyred people emerge victorious and vindicated and the world system and those who are a part of it are finally judged.

1. (12.1–13.18) An allegory depicting the cosmic battle between God and Satan is reflected in the conflict of the church with the demonic powers.
    - a. (12.1–6) When true Israel produces the Messiah, then Satan, under the image of a great dragon, opposes him but God vindicates him through resurrection and ascension to his right hand, while the people of God are protected by God from Satan’s wrath for three-and-one-half years.
    - b. (12.7–17) When Satan rebelled against God, he was expelled from heaven to the earth where the cosmic struggle will be completed in the consummation of human history.
    - c. (13.1–18) The Dragon, the Antichrist, and the False Prophet form an unholy trinity that controls the world’s politico-religious system to severely persecute the church.
      - 1) (13.1–10) Satan (“*the Dragon*”) empowers his agent, the Antichrist (“*the beast from the sea*”), by a false death and resurrection, to dominate the political world for forty-two months.
      - 2) (13.11–18) A False Prophet (“*The beast from the earth*”) is empowered to dominate the world’s religious system to worship the Antichrist and to limit all commerce to those who worship him.
  2. (14.1–17) While God vindicates his people through persecution and martyrdom in his eternal kingdom, three angels call the earth-dwellers to repentance and announce final judgment, which is then consummated.
    - 1) (14.1–5) Those believers who are martyred for refusing the mark of the beast rejoice in their vindication in God’s presence.
    - 2) (14.6–13) God sends three angels to call the earth-dwellers to repentance, to predict the judgment of the world system, and to announce the doom of those who follow the Antichrist.
    - 3) [(14.12) *Parenthetical Note: Believers must endure.*]
    - 4) (14.14–20) The final judgment is depicted through Jesus’ image of the angels harvesting the earth.
- G. (15.1 – 16.21) The Seven Last Plagues: The Seven Bowls
1. (15.1–8) Announcement of the seven last plagues that will complete God’s righteous judgment of the earth.
  2. (16.1–21) the Seven Bowls
    - a. (16.1–2) First Bowl: Painful sores on all the beast followers.
    - b. (16.3) Second Bowl: Death of all sea life
    - c. (16.4–7) Third Bowl: All drinking water poisoned
    - d. (16.8–9) Fourth bowl: Sun scorches the beast’s followers, though they refuse to repent.
    - e. (16.10–11) Fifth Bowl: Darkness and agony on the capital city of the beast, though they refuse to repent.
    - f. (16.12–16) Sixth Bowl: Preparation of Kings of East/Earth for the Battle of Armageddon

- g. [(16.15) *Paranthesis note: Jesus is coming like a thief : Be prepared*]
- h. (16.17–21) The Seventh Bowl: Final Judgment

#### **IV. (17.1 – 21.9) The Third vision: Christ on Earth in Judgment and Reign**

- A. (17.1–18) The satanically inspired world system (Babylon) to be destroyed by the final King and the Beast.
- B. (18.1–24) Proleptic Vision of Babylon’s destruction.
- C. (19.1–10) Rejoicing in heaven over Babylon’s fall.
- D. (19.11–21) Return of Christ — Armageddon.
- E. (20.1–6) The Millennial Kingdom.
- F. (20.7–10) Final Rebellion and judgment of Satan.
- G. (20.11–15) Final judgment of Humans.
- H. (21.1–8) The Eternal State: The New Jerusalem.

#### **V. (21.9 – 22.6) The Fourth vision: Christ in the Eternal State**

- A. (21.9–27) The Bride: The New Jerusalem.
- B. (22.1–5) The eternally sufficiency of God in the eternal state.
- C. (22.6) The certainty that these visions will be fulfilled.

#### **VI. Epilogue**

- A. (22.7) Jesus pronounces a benediction on all who obey the prophecy.
- B. (22.18–11) The intermediary angel commands John to worship God and obey the prophecy.
  - 1. (22.12–16) Jesus final benediction.
  - 2. (22.17) The Spirit’s invitation.
  - 3. (22.18–19) John’s final warning.
  - 4. (22.20–21) Benediction.



# The Book of Revelation

## (Historic Premillennialism)

Prologue 1.1–8	First Vision 1.9–3.22	Second Vision 4.1–16.21						Third Vision 17.1–21.8			Fourth Vision 21.9–22.6		Epilogue 22.7–21
<i>“Write, therefore, the things you have seen, both the things that are and the things that will happen after this.” (1.19)</i>													
Introduction (parallels Conclusion)	“Christ Judges the Church”	“Christ in Heaven Judging the Earth”						“Christ on Earth in Judgment and Reign”			“Christ in the Eternal State”		Conclusion (parallels Introduction)
	2–3	4/5	6	(7)	8–9	(10–11)	(12–14)	15–16	17–18	19	20	21–22	
<b>1</b> God’s revelation to his servants  <b>1</b> Message comes from God  <b>1</b> What must soon take place  <b>3</b> Blessing on reader/hearer  <b>3</b> Words of this prophecy  <b>3</b> Keep the message  <b>3,7</b> Jesus’ soon return  <b>3,6</b> Be Faithful!  <b>8</b> Jesus is the Alpha & Omega	<b>The Seven Churches</b>	<b>Images of the Great Tribulation</b>						<b>Return and Reign of Christ</b>			<b>New Heavens and Earth</b>		<b>6</b> God’s revelation to his servants  <b>6</b> Message comes from God  <b>6</b> What must soon take place  <b>7</b> Blessing on reader/hearer  <b>7,10</b> Words of this prophecy  <b>7</b> Keep the message  <b>7,12,20</b> Jesus’ soon return  <b>7,9,11,14,17</b> Be Faithful!  <b>13</b> Jesus is the Alpha & Omega
		<b>Seals</b>	<b>Trumpets</b>	<b>Cosmic Battle</b>			<b>Bowls</b>	The Fall of Babylon (the World System)	The Return of Christ	The Millennial Kingdom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New Creation mirrors Gen. 1–3</li> <li>• The New Creation is a City &amp; the City is a Temple</li> <li>• Heaven &amp; Earth a Temple</li> <li>• “The dwelling of God is with man!” (21.3)</li> <li>• The destiny of the conquerors</li> <li>• Outside are the cowards</li> </ul>		
	1 Ephesus	<b>1</b>		By a redemptive analogy, the cosmic battle is depicted in the political & religious world-system which will persecute the church			<b>1</b>						
	2 Smyrna	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>				<b>2</b>						
	3 Pergamum	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>				<b>3</b>						
	4 Thyatira	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>				<b>4</b>						
	5 Sardis	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>				<b>5</b>						
	6 Philadelphia	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>				<b>6</b>						
7 Laodecia	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>										
		<b>Proleptic Visions of Judgment and Vindication</b>											
		7.1–17	11.11–13	14.1–11									
		<b>Proleptic Visions of the Consummation</b>											
		<b>7</b> (8.1–5)	<b>7</b> (11.15–19)	(14.14–20)		<b>7</b> (16.17–21)							
<b>Preparation</b>		<b>→ A N T I C I P A T I O N →</b>						<b>Consummation</b>					