

Is Revelation 20 the Only Supporting Text for Premillennialism?

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In his defense of amillennialism against premillennialism, Robert B. Strimple makes mention of “one-text premillennialists”—premillennialists who allegedly rely solely on Rev 20:1–10 for their view that there will be an earthly kingdom of Christ after the second coming of Jesus.¹ In my own dealings with the millennial issue I find that there is a common perception held by amillennialists and postmillennialists that premillennialism itself is based solely on Revelation 20. And supposedly without this passage premillennialism would have no support.

With this paper I will address the perception that premillennialism is a one passage viewpoint. While there certainly may be “one-text premillennialists” it is not true that premillennialism is based only on Revelation 20. Although Revelation 20 is the only passage in the Bible that explicitly mentions “a thousand years,” many premillennialists believe there are other passages that are consistent with the idea of an intermediate kingdom after the present age but before the eternal state.

In a nutshell, our reasoning goes like this: *In addition to Revelation 20, several Old Testament passages predict an era on this earth that is far better than the current age we live in but not yet as perfect as the coming final eternal state. Thus, there is a necessity of an intermediate kingdom after the second coming of Jesus but before the eternal state.* As Wayne Grudem puts it:

Several Old Testament passages seem to fit neither in the present age nor in the eternal state. These passages indicate some future stage in the history of redemption which is far greater than the present church age but which still does not see the removal of all sin and rebellion and death from the earth.²

Isaiah 65

One such passage is Isaiah 65. Verse 20 in particular states:

No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the child shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.

The issue at hand in this verse, which is discussing conditions associated with the new heavens and new earth, is longevity of life. Whenever this prophecy is fulfilled people will be living so long that if they die at age 100 something must be wrong since it is expected that people will live much longer than that. In fact, it will be assumed that a person dying at the age of 100 must have done something wrong. They must be “accursed.” So notice two important things here with Isa 65:20—an increased longevity of life and the presence of sin which brings curses and death.

Now we must ask the question, “When will these conditions described in Isa 65:20 take place? Can it be during our present age? The answer is clearly, No. We live in a day where people live between 70–80 years on average (see Ps 90:10). If a person dies today at age 100 we say he lived a long life, not a short one. So will Isa 65:20 be fulfilled in the coming eternal state? The answer again must be, No. In the eternal state there is no longer any sin, death, or curse (Rev 21:4; 22:3), so no one will be dying.

¹ Robert B. Strimple, “Amillennialism,” *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 118. Strimple was mostly referring to George Ladd. We are not claiming that Strimple is saying all premillennialists only claim they have one passage to support premillennialism.

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1127.

Therefore, Isa 65:20 must be fulfilled in an era that is different from our current period yet distinct from the eternal state. This means there must be an intermediate kingdom or what we call a millennium. Compare the three eras:

Present Age: Lifespans of 70–80 years

Millennial Kingdom: Lifespans well beyond 70–80 years but sin, death, and curses exist.

Eternal State: People live forever with no presence of sin, death, or curse.

This understanding of Isaiah 65 is not recent. Christians of the second century viewed this passage as support for premillennialism. Martin Erdman points out that Isaiah 65:20–25 formed “the scriptural basis, besides Rev. 20:1–10, on which Asiatic millennialism built its chiliastic doctrine.”³ This was true for Justin Martyr. In reference to Isaiah 65 Justin said, “For Isaiah spoke thus concerning this period of a thousand years.”⁴ Erdman points out that Justin’s reference to Old Testament prophets “indicates his reliance on the Old Testament as the primary source of his chiliasm. He did not shy away from utilizing different passages from the Hebrew Bible to strengthen his argument in favor of a literal millennium.”⁵ Likewise, the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* was a premillennialist, and according to Erdman, “his chiliastic views are partially based on verses from the Old Testament.”⁶

Zechariah 14

Zechariah 14:5–17 also supports premillennialism. Verse 9 states that the “LORD will be King over all the earth” after His feet stand on the Mount of Olives (v. 4), but there is still disobedience and rebellion on the part of some nations. It is predicted that Egypt and other nations will be punished with drought when they do not obey the Lord as they should (vv. 18–19). Grudem states the issue well:

Here again the description [Zech 14:5–17] does not fit the present age, for the Lord is King over all the earth in this situation. But it does not fit the eternal state either, because of the disobedience and rebellion against the Lord that is clearly present.⁷

According to premillennialists, these conditions of Zechariah 14 can only occur in an intermediate kingdom between the present age and the eternal state.

While people from all nations are being saved in the church age, the nations themselves do not obey our Lord (see Psalm 2). In fact, they persecute those who belong to the Lord. In the millennial kingdom Jesus will rule the nations while He is physically present on earth. The nations will obey and submit to His rule, but as Zechariah 14 points out, whenever a nation does act as they should there is punishment. On the other hand, in the eternal state there will be absolutely no disobedience on the part of the nations. The picture of the nations in the eternal state is only positive. The kings of the nations bring their contributions to the New Jerusalem (see Rev 21:24) and the leaves of the tree of life are said to be for the healing of the nations (see Rev 22:2). To compare:

Present Age: Jesus is in Heaven and the nations do not yet submit to Jesus as King.

Millennial Kingdom: Jesus rules the nations on earth and punishes those nations that do not act as they should.

Eternal State: The nations act exactly as they should with no need of punishment.

³ Martin Erdmann, *The Millennial Controversy in the Early Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 118.

⁴ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, The Ante-Nicene Fathers* 80, 1:239.

⁵ Erdmann, 138.

⁶ Erdman, 149.

⁷ Grudem, 1129.

Psalm 72

Psalm 72:8–14 is another passage that has implications for an intermediate kingdom:

- ⁸May he also rule from sea to sea
And from the River to the ends of the earth.
⁹Let the nomads of the desert bow before him,
And his enemies lick the dust.
¹⁰Let the kings of Tarshish and of the islands bring presents;
The kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts.
¹¹And let all kings bow down before him,
All nations serve him.
¹²For he will deliver the needy when he cries for help,
The afflicted also, and him who has no helper.
¹³He will have compassion on the poor and needy,
And the lives of the needy he will save.
¹⁴He will rescue their life from oppression and violence,
And their blood will be precious in his sight.

This messianic psalm appears to go beyond the experience of Solomon to that of the coming Messiah. This King's rule will be global ("to the ends of the earth") and "all nations serve him." Yet verses 13–14 also mentions the presence of "the poor and the needy" that need rescue. Again, conditions are described that cannot be harmonized with our present world or the final eternal state. As Grudem states, "All of this speaks of an age far different from the present age but short of the eternal state in which there is no more sin or suffering."⁸ To compare:

Present Age: Messiah is not ruling over the entire earth.

Millennial Kingdom: Messiah is ruling over the earth and there is still the presence of the poor and needy who need rescue.

Eternal State: Messiah is ruling but no presence of the poor and needy.

So is premillennialism a 'one-passage' viewpoint as some think? Not at all. The idea of an earthly kingdom that comes after Jesus' return but before the eternal state is taught in several Old Testament passages and Revelation 20. In the course of progressive revelation, Revelation 20 reveals to us how long this intermediate kingdom will be ("a thousand years") but it is not the first and only reference to such an era.

When someone says to me, "You only have one passage, Revelation 20, which allegedly teaches a millennium," I say, "That's not true. Revelation 20 tells me how long Christ's intermediate earthly kingdom will be—one thousand years—but other passages teach the idea of an intermediate kingdom." Premillennialism, therefore, is a doctrine found in both the Old and New testaments.⁹

⁸ Grudem, 1129.

⁹ I purposely have not discussed many New Testament passages that are consistent with premillennialism such as Matt 19:28; 25:31; Acts 1:6; Rev 5:10 and others that place the coming of the kingdom in the future at the time of the second coming. The main point to show here is that the Old Testament teaches the idea of an intermediate earthly kingdom.