

Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003. 271pp. (paper). Reviewed by Massimo Mollica, M.Div.

Kim Riddlebarger's book *A Case for Amillennialism* seeks to make a detailed case for amillennialism, just like its title communicates. For the most part, the reader will find Riddlebarger's tone gracious and irenic in the midst of dealing with a subject that often becomes emotionally charged. Riddlebarger's book looks at the subject of the millennium from hermeneutical, theological, and exegetical angles. While it evidences a decent level of research and gets technical, the serious-minded lay person could read this book. Though there is little for a dispensational premillennialist to agree with, we can agree with him that postmillennialism and preterism are not biblical and that Christ will return again. This review will offer critiques on a broad level and then move to a few focused areas of analysis before offering a final comment on what kind of contribution this book makes to the millennial debate.

Initially, I was very hopeful that Riddlebarger's book would really contribute to the ongoing discussion between amillennialists and dispensationalists. Much development and clarification has occurred within dispensationalism since the mid-1980's with the rise of Progressive Dispensationalism. Given that Riddlebarger's book was published in 2003, he had access to all the published developments in dispensationalism. I was hoping to see Riddlebarger interact with their scholarship. However, Riddlebarger is disappointing as he states, "The success of progressive dispensationalism remains an open question" (27) and then he practically dismisses the progressives for the rest of the book, relying primarily upon John Walvoord and J.

Dwight Pentecost for academic dispensationalism and upon popular dispensationalists like Tim LaHaye.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Riddlebarger characterizes dispensationalism often by its popular form. For example, the readers are led to believe that all dispensationalists believe that Israel's 1948 return to their land is fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant and other prophetic Scriptures. To an open-minded dispensationalist like myself, I found my mind closed fairly quickly as a consequence of his reliance upon "Left Behind" dispensationalism.

The glaring weakness of this book lies in its methodology. Riddlebarger insists on the priority of the NT when interpreting the OT. He states that the historic Protestant hermeneutic is that "The New Testament must be seen as the final authority and interpreter of the Old Testament . . . Historically, Protestant interpreters have argued that the New Testament provides the controlling interpretation of the Old Testament" (36-37). What is disappointing is that Riddlebarger assumes that the NT writers are always "interpreting" the OT and provides very little justification for his view. Evangelical theology is at a stage in its history where it does little good to assert something that has been asserted in previous works without dealing with the criticisms it has already received and without dealing with the logical ramifications of the assertion. It would have been more useful if Riddlebarger had shown how his view of testament priority allows for the OT to actually be revelation to the original audiences and how his view of testament priority does not raise questions about the truthfulness of God, especially in light of Riddlebarger's use of "reinterpretation" terminology. He states "But eschatological themes are reinterpreted in the New Testament, where we are told these Old Testament images are types and shadows of the glorious realities that are fulfilled in Jesus Christ" (37). What is ironic is that he

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<sup>1</sup> He has one or two references to the likes of Saucy and Bock. He occasionally refers to Blaising's chapter on Premillennialism in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, but without significant interaction.

states that the OT must not become the hermeneutical fulcrum for the NT, but when it comes to Revelation, he dogmatically asserts that the OT should be our interpretive anchor because John's thought world was the OT (198-99). If only Riddlebarger would apply this principle to other parts of the NT, he might gain more insight into their meanings, especially of the "age to come" which he so frequently refers to from the gospel texts.<sup>2</sup>

This methodological issue undercuts the contribution of Riddlebarger's book because he still, like his amillennial predecessors and contemporaries, does injustice to the OT doctrine of Israel's restoration. He states, "the promised restoration of Israel pointed ahead to the church" (55). Riddlebarger, like others of his theological stripe, touts Galatians 3:28-29; 6:16; 1 Peter 2:9; Acts 15's use of Amos 9, and then declares victory for his view without specifically engaging any OT restoration text in detail. Dispensationalists (revised and progressives alike) have addressed these alleged proof-texts that the church is the new Israel. It is doubtful that any progress will be made until the amillennialists engage in exegesis and argumentation over the countless OT prophetic texts, like Ezekiel 36-37. Riddlebarger's view of NT priority is selective as well. Following very similar lines of argumentation as Robert Strimple's essay on "Amillennialism" in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, Riddlebarger concludes that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy including the true Israel and the temple. However, Riddlebarger ignores the texts in the NT that speak of Israel's restoration (Matt 19:28; Acts 1:6) and the texts that speak of an eschatological temple (2 Thess 2:4). Why are those texts not allowed in his view of NT interpretive priority?

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<sup>2</sup> When the gospel writers refer to the "age to come," this builds upon OT teaching of the Messianic kingdom.

Riddlebarger devotes a significant section of his book to expositing critical texts. These texts include Daniel's seventy weeks (Dan 9), the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24), Romans 11, and Revelation 20:1-10. If nothing else, the reader will benefit from seeing how amillennialism deals with these texts. While a full response to each of these texts is beyond the scope of this review, a few responses are in order. Regarding Daniel's seventy weeks, Riddlebarger raises issue with the gap posited by dispensational interpreters, saying that the first three and a half days of the seventieth week take us up to the crucifixion of Christ. Then Riddlebarger says that the final half of the seventieth week is spiritualized by Revelation to refer to the entire church age. He goes on to say that the covenant of Daniel 9:27 is the Covenant of Grace and says that the destruction of the city in 9:26 occurred in A.D. 70, its destruction only being solidified or confirmed in Daniel's actual seventy weeks, of which A.D. 70 is not a part. Frankly, the dispensational gap is much more convincing than saying 9:27 refers to a theologically concocted covenant and that the first sixty nine and half weeks are taken as literal and chronological, but the final half a week is stretched out over the church age. Furthermore, Riddlebarger does not deal adequately with 9:26's reference to the people of the prince to come and to the destruction of the city.

Riddlebarger's chapter on Romans 11 is probably the best contribution this book makes as he argues for a future salvation of Israel at the end of the age in association with the resurrection. While I do not think Riddlebarger takes in all the data of Romans 11, I am hopeful that this chapter will cause more amillennialists to hold his position rather than the view that there is no future salvation of Israel. If amillennialists hold Riddlebarger's view, then there is a potential for better discussion with dispensationalists. Fatal to Riddlebarger's view is that he does not deal with the fact that even while Israel is in a state of rebellion, Paul still refers to them as in possession of the covenants (Rom 9:4) and as elect and beloved (Rom 11:28-29).

Furthermore, Riddlebarger does not deal adequately with Rom 11:26-27 which ties the conversion of Israel back to OT texts that speak of the second coming, not the first. Additionally, he fails to see that the restoration of Israel is something that the OT ties to the conversion of Israel. So, the dispensational interpretation of tying Israel's conversion to its restoration is anchored in the OT prophetic Scripture. This is something Riddlebarger cannot see because he has already concluded that the promised restoration of Israel is today's church.

No treatment of a book on the millennium would be complete without explaining Revelation 20. Riddlebarger takes a slightly different approach on it than I had seen before, which was refreshing. He goes into detail explaining apocalyptic genre and how Revelation is full of symbols. He provides various arguments for recapitulation, and to my surprise, he does not tie the binding of Satan to Matthew 12:28-29. This is a slight break from his predecessors, but he continues to dogmatically assert that the crucifixion and resurrection are what bound Christ. He neglects the undesirable consequences that such a view leads to when the unbinding of Satan is mentioned. If the crucifixion/resurrection bound Satan, then what about these historical events will be undone when Satan is unbound at the end of the thousand years? Regarding apocalyptic genre and the amillennial interpretation, Riddlebarger states that his interpretation "lets John speak in the light of his own thought world." This is where amillennialism runs into historical problems. If amillennialism is closer to John's thought world and John's knowledge of genre, why were the earliest churches premillennial, including Papias, the disciple of John? Certainly John was closer to understanding how genre worked than we are, so how come the earliest churches missed the point?

One of Riddlebarger's main complaints about premillennialism is that he thinks premillennialists believe that glorified saints are part of the rebellion at the end of the

millennium, thus man's glorified state is not secure from sin. However, here Riddlebarger misunderstands premillennial eschatology. Those that rebel are the offspring and descendants of tribulation saints who survive and enter the millennial kingdom in non-glorified bodies. Furthermore, even the OT confirms that there will be sin after the return of Christ because the entire world lives under the threat of punishment for disobedience (Zech 14:16-19). Riddlebarger overlooks this fact, perhaps because of his deemphasizing of the OT.

With all of this said, an overall assessment can now be offered regarding the usefulness of Riddlebarger's book. If I were an amillennialist, I'm sure I would love this book and hope for many to read it. However, with respect to the overarching millennial debate in church history, it represents a small step forward, not a big step. Since it is gracious in spirit, it is useful to those who disagree because it is a good resource to see how today's amillennialists argue their case. However, this book undercuts its value by not advancing the debate with respect to OT texts. Riddlebarger wanted to try to clear up the belief that amillennialists do not take the prophetic passages of the Bible seriously. He certainly tried to delve into NT prophecy through some of his expositions, but, with the exception of his weak attempt at Daniel 9, expositions of key OT texts were "Left Behind" in the discussion. This is not helpful for advancing the debate. A final contribution is that in his expositions, the reader will occasionally find something new to think about and be challenged by. Overall, the book is worth the read to the serious eschatology student. May God give grace to those open-minded readers who are undecided in their view on the millennium that they might not fall into the same traps Riddlebarger has.