Growing up, every time Israel was in the news was an opportunity for some spirited conversations and speculations about the role they would play in the End Times. Every war and conflict in the Middle East was a “sign of the times” and it wasn’t uncommon to hear some charismatic preacher explaining how Apache attack helicopters were the locusts of Revelation 9. Everyone knew that a secret rapture before the seven-year Great Tribulation would then give way to the final return of Jesus Christ who would put an end to the Antichrist and the Devil before He made a new heaven and earth. This was, for me and many others in my circles, simply a cardinal doctrine of Christian belief. Popular apocalyptic literature and TV evangelists only seemed to confirm this perception, and I was only peripherally aware that there were other differing views on eschatology. “Oh yea sure, there’s those other guys who believe something else... but that’s just their interpretation, right? Clearly they’re missing it!”

However, as I began to study more I realized that the topic of eschatology was in fact one of great variety of interpretation and also heated debate. This may often times discourage many from pursuing to understand it more, seeing it as a hopeless cause, too complicated for mere mortals to wrap their feeble minds around. However, as Johann G. von Herder once said, “Where a book, through thousands of years, stirs up the hearts and awakens the soul, and leaves neither friend nor foe indifferent, and scarcely has a lukewarm friend or enemy, in such a book there must be something substantial, whatever anyone may say.” So it is definitely a profitable pursuit to seek understanding and one which is essential to Christianity, as our ultimate hope is eschatological in nature. Hence,

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1 Quoted in Daly, Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity, 82.
eschatology cannot merely be an important part of Christian doctrine, but rather, one’s eschatological outlook will affect many various points of faith and ministry.²

[Eschatology—defn: Study of last things or End Times; eschatological is the adjective meaning, ‘having to do with the end times or last things.’]

In this article, the three main views on the millennium in Revelation 20 will be briefly stated, then the history of millennial views in the early church will be considered. The popular modern view of Dispensational Premillennialism will be examined in the historical context of its development in order to understand its rise to contemporary popularity within some Evangelical circles. Then, the methodology of interpretation for approaching NT eschatology will also be briefly considered. Following these considerations, the literary structure of the book of Revelation will be looked at, and a brief argument for an amillennial view of Revelation 20 will be posited. Some responses primarily to Dispensational and Historic Premillennial arguments and objections will also be considered along the way. Given the space here, all views and objections will not be able to be adequately represented, however I will attempt to interact with what I think are some of the major issues. I have not interacted as much with postmillennial views in this article as it does share quite a bit of similarity with amillennialism. Perhaps I will do so at a later time, however, many thorough resources are available in the bibliography and footnotes that deal more extensively with this topic. Also, my use ridiculous memes and jokes are meant purely in good humour and fun—not to disrespect—to keep things a little more light-hearted as it can be a very serious topic.

Definitions of the Three Major Views on the Millennium (with charts... yay!)

Premillennialism (Premil) is the position that says Christ will come back before the millennial reign in Revelation 20. According to this view, the present church age continues toward a time of great tribulation. After this time of tribulation, at the end of

² Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 57. One’s eschatological stance however, is a secondary issue and not one which is salvific (concerning salvation), nor grounds for disunity among believers, even in cases of intense disagreement about the details—assuming traditional orthodoxy on primary issues.
the church age, Christ returns and establishes a physical earthly millennial kingdom. When he returns, Satan will be bound and believers who have died will be resurrected. Then, together with them, believers who are still alive will reign with him on earth for the thousand years. Both will receive glorified resurrection bodies and many of the unbelievers still on earth will turn to Christ and be saved. At the end of the millennium, Satan will be released to lead a final rebellion with the many unbelievers who still remain. Satan will be decisively defeated and a second resurrection of dead unbelievers will be raised for final judgment before the eternal state.

A modern variation on the Premil position is called Dispensational Premil. In this view, Christ’s return is not just before the millennium, but also before the great tribulation—so it adds another, sudden return of Christ to call believers to himself. This is commonly referred to as the Rapture. According to this view, after the Rapture, there will be a seven-year tribulation period after which Christ will return in fullness to reign for the millennium. This view has become very popular among a lot of mainstream Evangelicals, so we will explore this view and its origins a bit more.

Postmillennialism (Postmil) understands that Christ will return after the millennium. According to this view, the progress of the Gospel will gradually increase until a majority of the world becomes Christian. As a result, society will be influenced by

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Christianity and increasingly function according to God’s standards—gradually ushering in the ‘millennial age’ of peace and righteousness on earth which will last for a long period of time. At the end of this period, Christ will return to earth, believers and unbelievers will be raised, and final judgment will occur. Then there will be a new heaven and earth and the entrance into the eternal state. This view tends to be very optimistic.\(^4\)

Amillennialism (Amil) understands the Second Coming of Christ to be a single event, instead of occurring in two phases.\(^5\) The binding of Satan in Revelation 20 for a thousand years refers to the present rule of Christ through the church, beginning at the death and resurrection of Jesus (John 12:31-33) and continuing until the Parousia. Because Satan was bound by Christ’s victory at Calvary and the empty tomb, the spread of the gospel is not able to be hindered by Satan deceiving the nations, though he still exercises some limited influence.\(^6\) It understands the first resurrection as an allusion to a Christian’s salvation—conversion from spiritual death to life—at which they began to reign presently with Christ (cf. Eph 2:1-7; Col 3:1-4).\(^7\) Both Postmil and Amil positions understand Christ’s final coming, the resurrection and judgment as one event. This is one of the major distinctions between them and the Premil view. One strength of the Amil view is realism. In our present time we will experience victory and defeat, good and evil, until the end. So, the future is neither a climaxed continuation of gradual improvement which establishes Christ’s reign as in Postmil, nor is it an abrupt collapse as in Premil. “The kingdom of God does not come by human cooperation with the divine power currently at work in the world, but neither is it simply the divine gift for which we can only wait expectantly.”\(^8\) So, unbridled optimism and despairing pessimism are both inappropriate outlooks.\(^9\)

\(^4\) Grudem, Systematic Theology, 1110—1111.
\(^5\) Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, 174.
\(^6\) Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 40.
\(^7\) Plate, What Does the Future Hold, 77. Some amillennialists see the first resurrection as a believer’s entrance into heaven upon death.
\(^8\) Grentz, Millennial Maze, 187.
\(^9\) Plate, What Does the Future Hold, 78.
Early History

All the orthodox early church fathers believed in the resurrection, future judgment and Second Coming of Jesus. However, other details which we are concerned with today were not necessarily developed by all the church fathers. Maybe the most striking thing about the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age (period of time from the end of the NT to before the Council of Nicea in 325 CE) is that chiliasm or what we may call Historic Premil, seemed to be the most prominent view. Premil advocates usually point this out as a support for their position, however we must examine this claim. Among some of the cited early Premil material is the Didache (an early church teaching document probably written around the second century which dealt with many various doctrines of the faith), especially chapter 16, and other church writers such as Justin Martyr (c. 110-165 CE), Irenaeus (c. 140-202 CE), and Tertullian (c. 155-240 CE), who conceptualized the millennium as a time of peace, restoration, prosperity and earthly happiness where the saints reign with Christ. It should be noted though that the Didache’s chiliasm is questioned. Also, while Justin Martyr (“The First Apology of Justin,” 180) clearly believed in two advents, he also accepted that there are good Christians who hold other views. So even then, this was not the only view of the church. Early Premil was held mostly among Jewish converts and a few Apostolic Fathers. However, it is worth noting also that those who do not mention a Premil view had great weight of authority and influence such as Ignatius (c. 35/50 to 98/108 CE), Polycarp (69-155 CE) and Clement (150-215 CE).

There is, however, a shift which began to happen in millennial views even from fairly early. Hippolytus (c. 170-236 CE), the Roman presbyter, showed the unity of Revelation with the rest of the NT writings and his commentary on Daniel and work on the Antichrist represent an original exegetical interpretation of a more spiritual nature which formed a third-century alternative to the Alexandrian current which Origen climaxed. Origen (c. 184-153 CE) put forward a realized Christological eschatology and

12 St. Clair, Millenarian Movements in Historical Context, 77-78. According to McGrath (Christian Theology, 460), Tertullian saw the millennium as a time when the righteous would be compensated for their suffering for the faith before final entrance into heaven itself.
15 House, “Premillennialism in the ante-Nicene church,” 275. Also, Daley (The Hope of the Early Church, 10) observes that the eschatological themes in 1 Clement are presented as being in continuity with creation and expecting a culmination of the orderly process of creation, rather than a sudden crisis.
opposed literal readings of the millennium. He saw the thousand years in Revelation 20 as the heavenly intermediate state where souls wait for the final judgment and rest of the Kingdom.\textsuperscript{17} Eusebius (c.260-340 CE) and Jerome (347-420 CE) also criticized a presentation of a material form of the millennial kingdom of Christ on this earth, preferring instead a more symbolic reading.\textsuperscript{18} Jerome is quoted to have said that the book of Revelation had as many mysteries as it does words, and some are attracted or repelled by mystery. So, although some think that the early churches of Asia Minor may have intrinsically grasped the message of Revelation because they were more familiar with the context, it is clear that it is a point of contention even from as early as the second century.\textsuperscript{19} If even these early Christians had a variety of interpretations and difficulties with the text, I think we should at least be charitable in this matter with fellow believers who may disagree with our views.

Some contend that amillennial interpretations were typically associated with the Alexandrian schools of theology which tended to allegorize and spiritualize Scripture in a way that sometimes led to heretical beliefs.\textsuperscript{20} Augustine (354-430 CE) for them then, represents the first solid amillennial theologian. However, even John Walvoord—former president of Dallas Theological Seminary and an adamant Dispensational Premillennial apologist—concedes that the significance of much of the material relating to the millennium before Augustine is hotly debated and unclear in contrast to Augustine’s clearly Amil stance.\textsuperscript{21} What may be surprising to some is that Christian thinking was typically Amil for some 1,500 years since the fifth century, with Augustine’s voice proving decisive and “suppressing the millennial impulse as too literal, exaggerated and crude an interpretation of scripture.”\textsuperscript{22}

The concept of the millennium played little role for a large part of church history and even the Reformation. It was the rise of other positions that put considerable

\textsuperscript{17} McGinn, “Turning Points in Early Christian Apocalypse Exegesis,” 96—97. See also Origen, \textit{Contra Celsum}, 7.28-29 and Origen, “De Principiis,” 296—300. See also Carroll et al., \textit{The Return of Jesus in Early Christianity}, 165—166. Origen saw the Premil view as Jewish literalism in his \textit{De Principiis} 2.11.2-3, saying that the prophecies about Jerusalem are speaking of a heavenly city which contradicted Irenaeus’ \textit{Against Heresies} 5.35.


\textsuperscript{19} McGinn, “Turning Points in Early Christian Apocalypse Exegesis,” 83.

\textsuperscript{20} See for example Walvoord, “Amillennialism in the Ancient Church,” 301.

\textsuperscript{21} Walvoord, “Amillennialism from Augustine to modern times,” 420—421. Some posit however that Augustine was post-millennial. Kenneth L. Gentry marshals a list of figures from church history who were supposedly postmillennial. For more, see Gentry, “Postmillennialism,” 14—19. For Augustine’s view of Revelation see Augustine, “The City of God,” 421—451.

\textsuperscript{22} St. Clair, \textit{Millenarian Movements in Historical Context}, 87.
emphasis on the millennium which led to the position being called ‘amillennial’ and re-sparked much of the current debate.\textsuperscript{23} Walvoord charges that Augustine used a principle of spiritualizing Scripture freely, which he did not use in relation to predestination, hamartiology, salvation or grace.\textsuperscript{24} Also, Wayne H. House tries to connect the influence of Philo in introducing allegorical interpretations and the emergence of non-Premil views.\textsuperscript{25} However, can it be a right charge of unsubstantiated allegorizing when it is utilizing the same methods of interpretation which the NT authors themselves did? I think these charges are unwarranted and this argument will be briefly considered later.

The fact is that most of the writings from the earliest church fathers do not mention the millennium.\textsuperscript{26} This does not prove anything, other than perhaps that they weren’t concerned with the same questions we are today, or that given the circumstance of intense persecution in the early church, they did not have time to write long theological treatises and think deeply about these secondary questions of theology while running for their lives! The intense persecution under emperor Severus in 201-202 CE renewed interests in apocalyptic themes and coloured their use and interpretation—men like Hippolytus (170-236 CE) emphasized the nearness of the end to encourage his congregation in the face of persecution.\textsuperscript{27} Walvoord concedes that the ancient writers were not always clear in their position and sometimes held doctrines from opposing theories. “Hence a Father might use a figurative interpretation of Scripture that would seem similar to the modern amillennial method while at the same time subscribing to the idea of a coming kingdom on earth to follow the second advent—which is essentially premillennial.”\textsuperscript{28} We should heed the wise warning offered by Richard Muller that, when we bring modern debates to historical figures to answer, which they never directly answered or even asked, we will inevitably “accommodate” them to meet our own needs.\textsuperscript{29}

\section*{Dispensational Premillennialism and contemporary eschatology}

\textsuperscript{23} McGrath, Christian Theology, 461. Many suggest that the term amillennialism is somewhat misleading since it might imply a denial of the millennium altogether. The term ‘realized millennialism’ has been suggested in place. For more on this see Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, 173. The term itself was not used until the turn of the twentieth century, and it is believed that Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) may have been the first to use it. For more info on this see Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 39—40.

\textsuperscript{24} Walvoord, “Amillennialism from Augustine to modern times,” 424.

\textsuperscript{25} House, “Premillennialism in the ante-Nicene church,” 278.

\textsuperscript{26} House, “Premillennialism in the ante-Nicene church,” 275.

\textsuperscript{27} Carroll et al., The Return of Jesus in Early Christianity, 161.

\textsuperscript{28} Walvoord, “Amillennialism in the Ancient Church,” 292—293.

\textsuperscript{29} See Muller, The Unaccommodated Calvin, 14.
Dispensationalism is a system of biblical interpretation that distinguishes among seven distinct periods or “dispensations” in biblical history: innocence (before the fall); conscience (from the fall to Noah); human government (from Noah to Abraham); promise (from Abraham to Moses); law (from Moses to Christ); grace (the church age); and the kingdom (the millennium).]

Today, dispensationalism has influenced much of contemporary evangelicalism’s discussion of eschatology. A large portion of modern popular literature on the End Times, eschatological matters are read through the lens of current world events—trying to find links between geopolitical crises and biblical texts. This provides a constant stream of prophecy books trying to explain how these events were foretold by Hebrew prophets. This system of eschatology is fairly recent in origin, beginning in the 1800s with John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), but has captured the imagination of a broad spectrum of Evangelicalism today. Rossing, quotes one critic that the Rapture had its origins with a fifteen-year-old girl—Margaret MacDonald, in 1830 in Port Glasgow, Scotland at a healing service—who had a vision of a two-stage return of Christ. This was adopted and amplified by Darby who founded the Plymouth Brethren.

Darby stressed the importance of Israel and invented ‘dispensations’—intervals of time ordering God’s grand timetable for history. According to Darby, God has divided all of history into seven distinct dispensations and during each, God has dealt with people according to a different set of rules. Prior to this, this believe had never existed.

NT Wright, in his book The Millennium Myth, points out that in reaction to the Enlightenment, Dispensational Premillenialism developed primarily among fundamentalists as a gloomier version of Premil. Only a generation earlier, American evangelicals were overwhelmingly postmillennial. However, the horrors of two World Wars, the Great Depression, the Cold War and Middle Eastern tensions provided fertile grounds for this system to take root, assuring people that when things go from bad to worse, the church will be raptured from the earth and Christians will not be around to experience the Great Tribulation or the wrath of

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30 Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 33.
31 Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 27—28.
32 Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, 186.
33 Rossing, The Rapture Exposed, 22.
34 Rossing, The Rapture Exposed, 23. See Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 33-36 for further discussion on dispensations.
the Antichrist.\textsuperscript{36} With the formation of the state of Israel in 1948, this further confirmed for Dispensationalists their reading of biblical prophecy.\textsuperscript{37}

The popularity of the best-selling \textit{Scofield Reference Bible} in 1909, as well as the propagation of dispensational theology by Moody Bible Institute and Dallas Theological Seminary added to the rapid spread of this system within evangelicalism.\textsuperscript{38} Popular TV evangelists and dispensational authors such as John Hagee, Hal Lindsey, Jack Van Impe and Tim LaHaye, indelibly etched images of Armageddon and the Rapture into the evangelical imagination. \textit{The Late Great Planet Earth}, which became a bestseller in the 1970s, and the popular \textit{Left Behind} series of books and movies, which sold over sixty-five million products, helped to advance this new eschatology to the masses with an outlook of escapism almost akin to Manicheism (see footnote).\textsuperscript{39}

Its most extreme proponents sometimes dismiss legitimate concerns for environmental care, obsessing over confirming their prophetic doomsday countdowns, with the tendency to promote a goal of salvation out of the world. Historian, Randall Balmer, called this a “\textit{theology of despair}.”\textsuperscript{40} Premill eschatology generally offers a strongly pessimistic view of the world, expecting things to continue to deteriorate until God brings history to an end.\textsuperscript{41} From this brief survey of the history of the development of some eschatological interpretations, we see that the historical context of world affairs and culture often plays a significant role in influencing which way people generally lean. So history alone cannot solve this problem for us.

### Interpretation - Methodology

Therefore, before we look at the passage in Revelation 20, our methodological approach to interpretation must be considered before we approach the text. Dispensationalists argue for the literal interpretation of all prophetic portions of

\textsuperscript{36} Riddlebarger, \textit{A Case for Amillennialism}, 35.
\textsuperscript{37} See Walvoord, “The Theological Context of Premillennialism,” 395. Also Riddlebarger, \textit{A Case for Amillennialism}, 286. This was perhaps helped along by Berkhof’s \textit{Systematic Theology} in 1939 which argued that dispensationalism was false because of the impossibility of Israel becoming a nation again then.
\textsuperscript{38} Rossing, \textit{The Rapture Exposed}, 23—24.
\textsuperscript{39} Riddlebarger, \textit{A Case for Amillennialism}, 21—35. Manicheism: a dualistic religious system which blended Gnostic Christianity, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and other elements—especially doctrines of a cosmic conflict between forces of good and evil, light and darkness, the evilness of matter itself and a necessity for sexual and vegetarian asceticism. It is considered heretical by orthodox Christian standards.
\textsuperscript{40} Rossing, \textit{The Rapture Exposed}, 1—13. Also see Carroll et al., \textit{The Return of Jesus in Early Christianity}, 191—195 for a discussion on the development of Dispensational Premillennialism.
\textsuperscript{41} McGrath, Christian Theology, 461.
Scripture, which means that all the covenantal promises made to Israel in the OT are to be literally fulfilled in the millennial age. They see the formation of modern Israel in 1948 as fulfilment of this.\textsuperscript{42} Walvoord charges that, “Amillenarians use the literal method in theology as a whole but spiritualize Scripture whenever its literal meaning would lead to the premillennial viewpoint,” contending that this is a subjective principle which is open to manipulation by the interpreter.\textsuperscript{43} Charles Ryrie charged that even Historic Premillenarians also partially used spiritualization of prophecy.\textsuperscript{44} However, with regards to allegorical interpretation, there are clearly some passages in the Bible, such as John 15:1-8 and Isaiah 5:1-7, which are obviously meant to be understood that way. So it cannot be outright written off as never being a legitimate method of interpretation, though there are definitely inappropriate uses of spiritualization and allegory when the text itself does not call for it.\textsuperscript{45} However, to ignore clues within the text and genre of literature that give indication of a non-literal reading would actually not be to truly interpret the text 'literally' but rather in a 'literalistic' fashion.

For example, according to classical dispensationalists, promises like Genesis 17:7-8 were an unconditional covenant made with Israel which cannot be abrogated. However, this promise of land in Canaan made to Abraham was reinterpreted by Isaiah to mean a new heavens and earth, not just the land of Canaan (Isa 65:17-25; cf. 66:22). Furthermore, in Romans 4:13, Paul saw the fulfilment of the promise as being received through righteousness that comes by faith. If NT authors, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, reinterpreted the promise of land in terms of new heavens and earth, it raises great difficulty for Premil and would mean that Amil may be no less literal in its hermeneutic than the NT authors.\textsuperscript{46} Everyone has presuppositions which colour how they read Scriptures, and to assume that one of these millennial views is based on an unbiased reading is overly simplistic. We must first identify the presuppositions held before we come to the biblical text.\textsuperscript{47}

Historically, Christian theologians wrestled with the biblical text itself, comparing Scripture with Scripture.\textsuperscript{48} The interpretive tradition in church history has always insisted that it is best to allow the NT to interpret the OT and provide the controlling

\textsuperscript{42} Riddlebarger, \textit{A Case for Amillennialism}, 33—34.
\textsuperscript{43} Walvoord, “The Theological Context of Premillennialism,” 388.
\textsuperscript{44} Charles Ryrie, quoted in Riddlebarger, \textit{A Case for Amillennialism}, 48.
\textsuperscript{45} Plate, \textit{What Does the Future Hold}, 79.
\textsuperscript{46} Riddlebarger, \textit{A Case for Amillennialism}, 85—87.
\textsuperscript{47} Riddlebarger, \textit{A Case for Amillennialism}, 47.
\textsuperscript{48} Riddlebarger, \textit{A Case for Amillennialism}, 28.
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vantage point for understanding the OT and its prophecies. Another factor in interpretation is the *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith). “This refers to the importance of interpreting an unclear biblical text in light of clear passages that speak to the same subject rather than taking the literal sense in isolation from the rest of Scripture.”

If we allow for the OT to be interpreted in light of NT revelation, we see that much of the promises God made to Israel in the OT were fulfilled in Christ (see for example Romans 9:6-8 and 11:7). The dispensational assertion that the future millennium will see a reinstatement of the temple system and sacrifice represents a U-turn in redemptive history and a regression from the reality of Christ back to what were mere types and shadows. So, dispensational and some Historic Premill arguments that these prophecies to Israel will yet be fulfilled vanish in Jesus, who has fulfilled them and makes the necessity of a future physical earthly millennial reign obsolete.

**Progressive Parallelism (Structure)**

One of the biggest factors influencing how one reads and interprets the millennium in Revelation 20 is how one understands the overall structure of the book. For those who hold to a straightforward chronological reading, it is likely that they will conclude with a more Premillennial interpretation. The amillennial system of interpretation for the book of Revelation is called *progressive parallelism*. It sees the book as consisting of seven sections which run parallel to each other, each depicting in different ways the same period of time of the church and the world from the time of Christ’s first coming to his Second Coming. These series of visions function like different camera angles looking at the same period of time and events, but from various vantage points. This is also known as “recapitulation.” One of the major indicators of recapitulation happening in Revelation is the fact that the final End Time occurs several times in the book. Perhaps one of the clearest demonstrations of recapitulation is seen by comparing 12:7-11 with

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50 For a better discussion of the historic Protestant Hermeneutic and literal verses literalistic interpretation, please see Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 50—54.
51 Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 85. For a more in depth look at Christ and the fulfillment of OT prophecy as well as an argument against a return to types and shadows see pages 83—94. Hoekema also has an excellent critique of Dispensational Premillennialism in Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 194—222.
20:1-6. Also, Revelation 13, 16, and 19 depict the same event, and chapters 16 and 19 are about judgment day when Jesus Christ returns in wrath to judge the nations, raise the dead, and make all things new.54

To demonstrate the structure of recapitulation, it can be observed that each of the sections, except the first one, ends with an indication that the end-time has come. The first section is in chapters 1—3 with the glorified Christ in the midst of the seven golden lampstands and the letters to the seven churches. The principles, commendations and warnings in the letters have value for the church all throughout time—which provides a clue for the interpretation of the book as a whole. The second section is in chapters 4—7 and contains the vision of the seven seals and references the End Time in 6:15-17 and 7:15-17. The third section is in chapters 8—11 describing the seven trumpets of judgment, and it ends with the reference to final judgment in 11:18. The fourth section, chapters 12—14, contains the vision of the woman giving birth while the dragon waits to devour the child and a description of the dragon and two beasts. It ends with Christ’s coming for judgment in 14:14-15. The fifth section in chapters 15—16 describe the seven bowls of wrath and ends also with a reference to final judgment in 16:19-20. The sixth section, chapters 17—19, describes the fall of Babylon and the beasts and ends with a reference to the End Time in 19:11, 19-20. The seventh section in chapters 20—22 tells the doom of the dragon, Satan, and final judgment is depicted in 20:11-12, 14-15, then it describes the final triumph of Christ and his church in the renewed universe in the last two chapters.55 What are we to make of this? Are there six endings? Or is it more reasonable to see it as multiple accounts from different angles of the same time frame?

One argument by Premil interpreters is that the use of the Greek conjunction, καί (and), which links 19:11-21 and 20:1-6, indicates a historical sequence of events. However, καί often functions as a transitional word simply indicating a new vision. Only three out of the thirty-five occurrences of καί in 19:11-21 clearly demonstrate a chronological sequence.56 Revelation 19:17-21 and 20:8-10 contain repeated allusions to the battle of Ezekiel 38—39 and recount the same battle of 16:12-16, which is highlighted by the similar phrase “to gather them together for war” in all three passages which alludes to Zechariah 14:2.57 This repeated ‘reappearance’ of the End Time and seeming repetition of certain events throughout the book provide a strong argument for this interpretation of the literary structure of the book as a whole. If true, it poses a big problem for the

54 Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 231.
55 Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, 186 and 223—226.
56 Beale, The Millennium in Rev. 20:1-10, 32. See Beale, The Book of Revelation, 974—976 for a more in depth look at the use of καί in Revelation. See also Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 227.
57 Beale, The Millennium in Rev. 20:1-10, 33—34.
Premil chronological interpretation and is probably one of the strongest arguments for an Amil interpretation.\textsuperscript{58}

The Millennial Gap

Revelation 20 is the only text in the Bible which explicitly mentions this thousand-year reign of Christ. Nowhere else is this ‘millennial gap’ between the Second Advent and final judgment and ushering in of the eternal state mentioned. Hoekema argues that 1 Corinthians 15:23-24 gives no clear evidence for an earthly millennial reign, and there is no basis for this in any of Paul’s writings. The words “then comes the end” (1 Cor 15:24) which premillennialists use to support a delay between Christ’s coming and the end do not necessarily imply a long interval. The word εἰτα (then) can simply mean “thereupon” and means that only after this all has happened the consummation will come.\textsuperscript{59} If Paul meant to teach a thousand-year gap between the Parousia and the end, why would he pass over it without even a word? Matthew 13:39-40 and 49-50, where Jesus connects the “end of the age” with judgment, also pose a hard challenge to Premil. This is what Stanley Grenz called the “linchpin of premillennialism.”\textsuperscript{60} However, Matthew 25:31-32 clearly tells us that the judgment will occur at the time of our Lord’s return; “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (cf. Matt 13:40-43)—there is no mention of a gap between these events. The Premil insistence of a thousand-year gap between Jesus’ return and the final judgment must side step Scripture’s clear teaching that the resurrection (1 Cor 15:35-57; 1 Thess 4:13-5:11; 2 Thess 1:5-10), the restoration of all things (2 Pet 3:3-15) and the judgment all occur at the same time. So where is this millennial gap in a plain reading of these texts?\textsuperscript{61} It simply is not there. It seems that what causes some to read it differently is if you have a presupposition that there should be a gap in there, then you are more likely to separate the passages which talk about one aspect of Jesus’ return and others which speak about

\textsuperscript{58} See Beale, The Book of Revelation, 974—983 for further arguments supporting a nonsequential chronological relationship between 19:11-21 and 20:1-6 pointing to recapitulation.

\textsuperscript{59} Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, 184.

\textsuperscript{60} Grenz, The Millennial Maze, 128.

\textsuperscript{61} See Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 99—100 for a more in depth analysis of these texts.
another aspect—however, if you don’t then you unify them and see it as simply describing different aspects of the same event.

The Number One Thousand

Dispensationalists and some premillennialists assert that the number one thousand in Revelation 20 should be interpreted literally. Paige Patterson, in his commentary on Revelation says that, “while numbers do have symbolic significance, the repeated numbers such as the 42 months, 1,260 days, time and times and half a time, and the 1,000 year period emphasized here suggest that these periods are to be taken literally.” However, simply the repetition of numbers alone is not sufficient grounds to posit that they must be interpreted literally since there are numbers which are repeated in the book and yet are clearly symbolic, such as seven, ten, and three. Also considering the structure of recapitulation discussed earlier, this gives a context for interpreting what is happening in this seventh parallel vision. The book is full of symbolic numbers and it is likely that this number also should be viewed similarly. The number ten signifies completeness and a thousand is ten to the third power. So this expression “a thousand years” can be thought of representing a complete period of indeterminate length. Augustine also said that “[John] used the thousand years as an equivalent for the whole duration of this world, employing the number of perfection to mark the fullness of time. For a thousand is the cube of ten.”

We will next take a look at the text itself of Revelation 20 and explore an Amil reading.

The Binding of Satan (20:1-3)

1Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3and 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.

62 Patterson, Revelation, 353.
63 Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, 227.
64 Augustine, “The City of God,” 427. See also Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 236.
One of the main things we see in this passage is the binding of Satan so that he cannot deceive the nations (20:1-3). In Matthew 12:29 there is a connection to this. After Pharisees accused Jesus of using Satanic power to cast out demons, he replied, “How can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man?” The word used for “bind,” (δέω) is the same used in Revelation 20. Some object that in Matthew it is in reference to casting out demons. However, if we follow on in Matthew, this is evidence of the presence of the Kingdom (Matt 12:28), and it is because of this that the gospel can be preached to all nations (Matt 13:24-30, 47-50). When the seventy disciples returned from their mission in Luke 10 and reported that demons were subject to them, Jesus’ reply that he saw “Satan fall like lightning” (Luke 10:18) might at first seem really random and out of place. However, as it is said in response to the disciples’ report, it may then be understood to mean that Jesus saw that the Devil’s kingdom had suffered a crushing blow. The restraint of Satan is as a direct result of Christ’s death and resurrection. Colossians 2:15 states that Christ “disarmed” the demonic powers through the cross and Hebrews 2:14 says that Christ rendered the Devil powerless. Notice that these are all expressed as completed events. “We know that Satan was cast down when Christ was lifted up (John 12:31); thus it was Calvary’s victory that broke the grip of the devil on men and nations.” Augustine agreed that God “bridled and restrained his power so that he could not seduce and gain possession of those who were to be freed.”

This binding of Satan does not mean that all satanic operations cease during the millennial age, as many opponents of Amil mistakenly assume. Rather it means exactly what it says; that Satan cannot deceive the nations until he is released. We see that once he is released, he deceives the nations and they rise up together in rebellion—so this restraint on him is holding such a rebellion at bay for the current time. Also, Satan no longer has authority over the realm of the dead—since Jesus now holds the keys (cf. 1:18, 3:7-8). Yet, though he is bound during this present age, he still continues to be the “god of this age” who blinds “the minds of unbelievers” (2 Cor 4:4) and “the ruler of the kingdom

65 Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, 228—229.
66 Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, 229.
68 Arthur Lewis, quoted in Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 238.
70 See for example the counter arguments to the Amil view on ‘binding’ laid out in Grudem, Systematic Theology, 1117—1118. Brief responses to objections will be made here.
71 See Beale, The Book of Revelation, 986—988 for a more in depth discussion of Satan’s deceiving activities which are restrained.
of the air” (Eph 2:2) who “prowls around like a roaring lion” (1 Pet 5:8). Satan still rages against the Kingdom in a limited but sinister fashion, however his ultimate power to deceive the nations is bound by the truth of the gospel. He is like a chained savage animal who can still do great damage to anything in his reach. We can see this quite plainly in Revelation in each of the cycles of recapitulation where there is obviously the presence of demonic forces and evil in what is the current age.

However, in Revelation, the area of Satanic power is closely controlled by God. Demons can only come out of the pit when an angel with a key opens it (9:2-6), God has to command the Beast to be brought up out of the pit (11:7-8), and he has to be allowed to make war on the saints (13:7). Also, the “sealing” in verse 3 has a general meaning of “having authority over” and does not necessarily mean absolute confinement as some may think. If we look at the sealing of Christians in Revelation 7:3 and 9:4, this does not protect them in every way and they still suffer physical persecution but are sealed from spiritual harm. In the same way, the sealing of Satan here prevents him from inflicting spiritual harm on the saints. Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology*, makes the objection that this deception is currently going on in the church age and ends when the millennium begins. However, this poses a problem for his Premil position, since if that is the case, during the millennium Satan is bound—which according to his view means a total cessation of deceptive influence. Yet still we find a sufficient number of unbelievers whose “number is like the sand of the sea” (v. 8) at the end of the millennium remaining for Satan to then deceive and lead in rebellion. Where do these people come from? Why is it that there are so many who still don’t believe in an age where the Devil’s power is supposedly totally curtailed? Many premillennarians have purported various answers, however I do not find them satisfactory.

“God’s restraint of satanic deception of the nations (Rev 20:1–3) is a description of the present age of gospel preaching and is not a reference to a future millennium. This is the gospel dispensation when Satan is bound, and the gospel will go to the ends of the earth until the thousand years are over (Acts 17:30–31; Eph 3:4–6). Only then is God’s restraint of Satan lifted so that he can deceive the nations and organize

them against Christ’s church, the supreme act of rebellion that brings about the final judgment.”

So, although not a total cessation of demonic activities, in some real sense, the Devil is “bound” and this is why we can see the victory of the Kingdom through the advance of the gospel in this age.

**Thrones, first resurrection and reigning with Christ (20:4-6)**

4 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. 5 The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 6 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.

In verses 4-6, John says he sees “thrones.” Leon Morris points out that of the forty-seven times that the word “thrones” is used in Revelation, all but three appear to be in heaven. Also, considering that John sees the souls of those who had been beheaded, it is reasonable to conclude that the locale of his vision has shifted to heaven. So, what was described of the thousand years in verses 1-3 was on earth, and now verses 4-6 shifts focus to heaven. Because of the heavenly location, “There can be little doubt that the portrayal of beings sitting on ‘thrones’ is not intended to express the literal idea of people sitting on actual pieces of furniture and ruling from there. This is, rather, a figurative way of saying that they reign over a kingdom.” There, the ones on the thrones somehow have some part in Christ’s judging activity. This reigning goes together with judging, as seen when Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 19:24, that they will sit on twelve thrones and

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75 Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 232.
76 Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 237—239.
77 Morris, The Revelation of St. John, 236.
78 Beale, Book of Revelation, 995—996; see also Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 241.
judge the twelve tribes of Israel. Also, there is a connection earlier in Revelation 3:21; to the one who overcomes the right is given to sit on the throne. The ones who are seated on these thrones in 4-6 are those who have “come to life” (v.4) and are distinguished from the “rest of the dead” (v.5). They are distinguished from these other people who have also died—there are two classes of deceased. The vision here concerns the souls of Christian martyrs specifically—they are the ones who have overcome and now sit on the thrones.79

Premil contends that the first resurrection is a resurrection to eternal life while the second resurrection will be a resurrection to damnation. They claim that this is exactly what is found in the fifth beatitude here, “Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection” (Rev 20:6).80 Dispensationalists assert that those reigning in the millennium include both believers raised from the dead and also believers who are still alive when Christ returned. However, even in a Premil interpretation of this passage, nothing is said of the latter group here. Therefore, even according to Premil, this passage speaks about only risen believers reigning with Christ during the millennium which is a very different kind of earthly millennial reign than what most premillennialists teach.81 The major point of contention is what is meant here by the word ἐζησαν—translated “they came to life.” Premillenarian, George Ladd rightly notes that how an exegete interprets this will determine how the entire passage is understood.82 This is a point on which premillennialism stands or falls—for without two literal resurrections, the whole premise breaks down. However, John 5:24-25 states that the believers presently already have eternal life and have crossed over from death to life. “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” (John 5:24-25) So, a resurrection of some sort has already occurred for believers—moving from death to life.83 John 5:24-25 is in reference to this same ‘first resurrection’ from death which happens at salvation.84 Paul makes similar points in Ephesians 2:5-6 and Colossians 2:12 that we are made alive with Christ, raised with him and presently seated in the heavens.

From the passage, John contrasts the “first resurrection” and the “second death” (20:6). So, there is a contrast of a spiritual resurrection and a bodily one. He is distinguishing two resurrections of different kinds, not two subsequent resurrections of the same kind. Premil understands the term πρῶτος (first) as meaning sequentially

79 Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, 230—231.
80 Patterson, Revelation, 354.
81 Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, 184.
82 Ladd, Commentary on the Revelation of John, 265.
84 Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 100.
first. However, it may be in reference first of a different kind—so, the first resurrection is of a different kind than the second. For example, if we look at how “first” is used in Revelation 21, it is not in reference to the present world being first in a series of worlds, but rather a world of a different kind to the new world which is coming. It is something that passes away and is replaced by something new of a different kind—fallen creation gives way to redeemed heaven and earth. Also, to further this argument, the first death is a loss of physical life whereas the second death is of a different kind than a physical sense—a spiritual death. Likewise, this first resurrection should be understood as a spiritual one, at the time of conversion, different from the physical resurrection which will happen at the end of the age.

Problem of Evil in the Millennium (20:7-10)

7 And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison 8 and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. 9 And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, 10 and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

According to Premil, resurrected persons coexist with people who remain alive during the millennium, but Scripture does not teach such a mixture of resurrected and ‘unresurrected’ individuals. How did these people living on earth at the time of Christ’s Second Coming escape resurrection and judgment which comes together with his Second Advent? If John did introduce a millennial gap in Revelation 20, then was there a second

86 Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 245—247. Riddlebarger also notes, “When we turn to the book of Hebrews, the terms first and new are used to distinguish between the Mosaic economy of God’s redemptive covenant and that same covenant under its messianic administration (cf. Heb. 8:7–8, 13; 9:1, 15, 18; 10:9). It is interesting to note that the new covenant is also called the “second” (10:9).” Also “Paul contrasted the first man Adam (1 Cor. 15:45) with the second Adam (or man) from heaven.” The primary thrust was not that Adam was the first in a series of “Adams,” rather that Adam stands in contrast to Christ in all those they represent. (245—247)
fall of humanity to go along with it because of the problem of evil in the millennial age? Who are the people still on earth who revolt against Christ during the millennium (20:7-9)? This presence of evil in the millennial age is a serious problem faced by Premil. Supposedly, according to Premil, there is a fall of glorified saints (or their offspring) after the resurrection and judgment. So then, even after a thousand years of the glorified Christ’s rule on earth, is it still possible for apostasy to happen? However, I think it is more logical that instead of insisting that the resurrection in Revelation 20:5 is a future event, it should be read in parallel with John 5:24-25, which explicitly tells us that the first resurrection occurs at the moment of conversion.88

“The return of the glorified Christ and of glorified believers to an earth where sin and death still exist would violate the finality of their glorification. Why should believers, who have been enjoying heavenly glory during the intermediate state, be raised from the dead in order to return to an earth where sin and death still reign? Would this not be an anti-climax?”89

Furthermore, looking at 16:12-16, 19:19-20 and 20:8, we see common language being used for the gathering of forces together for war and also that they have been deceived into participating. This further enforces the structure of recapitulation that Satan’s deception of the nations in 20:8 “to gather them together for war” is the same event of deception of the nations as in 16:12-16 and 19:19.90 If chapter 20 chronologically follows 19:17-21, it makes no sense since it would be unnecessary to speak of protecting the nations from Satanic deception in 20:1-3 just after they have already been deceived in 16:13-16 and 19:19-20 and also destroyed by Christ in 19:11-21.91 It is much more reasonable, therefore, in light of the testimony of Scripture and the patterns seen in the text of Revelation itself, to view chapter 20 in light of recapitulation and the problem of evil in the millennium as simply describing the current ‘millennial’ age we’re experiencing today. Once the binding of Satan (20:1-3) during this age is lifted (20:7), the immediate result we see is that he is able to deceive the nations and they rise in rebellion against Christ before final judgment (20:8-10). Without that restraint of ‘binding’ on the Devil now, he would be able at any time to raise this insurrection of the nations before the appointed time.

88 Riddlebarger, A Case for Amillennialism, 100—101. See pages 274—277 for an in depth look at the problem of evil in the millennium. Augustine also was convinced of this position, see Augustine, “The City of God,” 425—426.
89 Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, 184—185.
90 Beale, The Book of Revelation, 980.
91 Beale, The Book of Revelation, 980—981.
Conclusion

In conclusion, biblical prophecy surrounding eschatology can be misused in a number of ways. While some treat it as a game, playing with symbols and numbers to fit their own predictions or using it as a weapon, fighting those who do not see the future exactly the way they do, its purpose is to comfort and encourage believers. While it is interesting to debate these varying positions, we must remember also to be charitable and show grace—keeping in mind that this is a secondary issue which we should not divide the body over. Although I have argued strongly, and used some rhetoric and humour, Premil, Postmil, and Amil are all rooted in conservative convictions. Each group should show love and respect for their fellow believers who may differ from them on this issue. All three major views are confident that Christ will return to right all injustices and take us home to be with him forever. We do not know the exact time of his return, and as a result must live as if it could happen any moment.

This article has considered briefly the historical development of eschatological views, the methodology of interpretation, the structure of recapitulation in Revelation and the testimony of Scripture itself, while looking at some of the objections. In my research, I have found that Historic Premil may have a strong testimony of the early church history, however I don’t find its interpretation of Scripture or the cohesion of its order of events satisfying. Dispensational Premil is even less appealing, and given its scrupulous beginnings and inconsistent exegesis, I don’t give it much validity. Postmillennialism, while I did not write much about it here, shares a lot of convictions with Amil, however I find it a bit too naively optimistic about the success of the Gospel, and there really is no space for what could be considered a “Great” Tribulation before the end.

So, while I can respect the position of other views, I find the amillennial view to be most compelling, both for its realistic outlook and interpretation of Scripture. It interprets the millennium as concurrent with this age and anything but a golden era in which lions and lambs play together. Instead, it is marked by conflict, martyrdom, and revolt against God. Revelation 20 depicts the church militant, not the church triumphant. However, despite the amillennial nomenclature, there is a real millennium. It is now, the age in which Christ

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92 Plate, What Does the Future Hold, 95.
93 Plate, What Does the Future Hold, 145. Plate’s book offers a helpful and charitable overview of the three major positions in the millennium debate and concludes with his own ‘eclectic’ interpretation which combines aspects from the three. Though I don’t agree with all his conclusions and details, I found it to be a thoughtful book that engaged kindly with differing views and represented well the attitude and grace which should be shown in discussing these views on eschatology.
rules—Jesus is already King and the Kingdom has come—and it is a present reality and not a future hope. Yet it is not here in its fullness, and so we cry out, “even so Lord Jesus, come.”

To that, we can all say “Amen.”

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**Bibliography**


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