

Notes on Millennialist Interpretation of the Thousand Year Reign and the Rapture

What follows below is intended to supplement what is said in my commentary, *Revelation*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015). For my interpretation of the thousand-year reign (Rev 20:4-6), see pp. 319-335, especially the excursus on the interpretation of the millennium through history, pp. 329-331. (Unless otherwise noted, page references are to *Revelation*; *asterisks indicate terms explained in the commentary’s glossary).

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Contents

Disclaimer	1
The Millennialist Understanding of the Millennium and Its *Eschatological Context	1
Incongruities of This Vision	2
What about the Rapture?.....	3
Where Does Millennialist Interpretation Go Wrong?.....	4
Final Word	5

Disclaimer

The notes below are not a thorough treatment of the subject, nor do I claim to be an expert on millennialist interpretations of Revelation. My goal has been to write a Catholic pastoral commentary on Revelation. Along the way I encountered a number of people who accept part or all of the dispensationalist approach to Revelation and its interpretation of the millennium and the rapture.

*The Millennialist Understanding of the Millennium and Its *Eschatological Context*

The leading interpretation of the millennium among fundamentalist and some evangelical Christians is the dispensationalist view (see [introduction](#) pp. 29-32, available online). According to this interpretation, before the great tribulation, understood as a three-and-a-half or seven-year time of intense trial (see sidebar, pp. 146-47), Christ will return,ⁱ raise believers who have died, and rapture all true Christians to heaven. After the tribulation Christ will return with the Church and defeat the beast, the false prophet, and their armies who have gathered for war at Armageddon in northern Israel (16:16; 19:11-21). Then the Church will reign with Christ for a thousand years, the Kingdom Age, on a transformed earth (fulfilling Isa 11:6-8—“the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,” and so on) “in a time of universal peace, prosperity, long life, and prevailing righteousness.”ⁱⁱ While the faithful Christians whom Christ has raised will live forever, the other human beings who survived the tribulation to live during the millennium will enjoy long lives (Isa 65:20).

After the thousand years Satan will be released for a short time and organize an uprising that takes the form of a military assault by an immense army from the remote parts of the earth

against the reign of Christ and the saints in Jerusalem (20:7-9). God will intervene to send fire from heaven to consume the armies of Gog and Magog and to cast Satan into the lake of fire (20:10). Then the unrighteous who have died will be raised and judged (20:11-15).

Incongruities of This Vision

In my opinion, some things just don't add up about the millennialist vision of the events of the end times described above. Here are a few specific problems:

1. Millennialists interpret Isaiah 65:18-25 as applying to the millennium, the Kingdom Age, since it describes a renewed Jerusalem and people living in peace, prosperity, and long but not eternal life in a transformed world. In its original context, however, this text immediately *follows* God's creation of "new heavens and a new earth" (Isa 65:17). What justifies interpreting the fulfillment Isa 65:18-25 before the fulfillment of Isa 65:17?ⁱⁱⁱ Revelation 21:1 locates the creation of the new heavens new earth immediately *before* the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev 21:2), implying that the new Jerusalem is where Isa 65:18-25 finds fulfillment.
2. What kind of life do the resurrected people of God live on earth during their millennial reign with Christ, while sin and death continue to characterize the rest of the population? In other words, it seems incongruous that these two populations could live side by side and intermingle in the affairs of this world.
3. Would the wicked think themselves able to overthrow the Risen Christ and the deathless saints? Would Christ and the saints not know to deal with an insurrection before their land is invaded and city surrounded?
4. Practically speaking, is there sufficient space in the Jerusalem of this world for all God's redeemed from all history to reside? Likewise, could a numberless army from the whole earth (16:14-16; 20:8) fit on the plains of Megiddo or surround Jerusalem? Given the vulnerability of concentrated ground forces to airpower in modern warfare, is the massing of all the world's armies in one place a plausible strategy? A literal interpretation of these texts strains the imagination.
5. Finally, is it reasonable to set aside the historic Christian understanding regarding the end of history to believe that, after coming a *second* time to rapture believers (in fulfillment of 1 Thess 4:15-17), Christ must return a *third* time to establish his millennial kingdom, and *then* the eternal kingdom of God must wait until the thousand years and a final Satanic attack is repulsed, after which the wicked who have died will finally be raised from the dead and judged? Traditional Christian eschatology and all the ancient creeds speak of only one return of Christ, a single general resurrection, and a single final judgment of the living and the dead, the just and the wicked.

Literalist interpretation seems ill-suited to the symbolic and visionary nature of Revelation. To interpret 19:17-21 and 20:7-10 as two final battles, one before an earthly millennium and one afterwards, seems to introduce many unnecessary perplexities. These are avoided if one accepts the possibility that 20:1-10 recapitulates the story of the final defeat of evil when Christ returns recounted in 19:11-21, but in a longer historical context and with special attention to what happens to the devil. The many allusions of both visions to Ezekiel 38-39 suggests that both refer to the same event, a single final battle of the forces of evil against God and his people that ends

when Christ returns in glory; the destiny of the forces of evil is, metaphorically speaking, fire from heaven and being consumed by vultures.^{iv}

What about the Rapture?

It is a common in dispensationalist interpretation to take the words “Come up here” in 4:1 to refer to the time when Christ will rapture true Christians to heaven (see 1 Thess 4:17) before “the great tribulation” takes place (7:14; 13:1-17; 17:1-18; see sidebar, pp. 146-47). The Scofield Bible note on 4:1 explains, “As the word ‘church’ does not appear again in The Revelation until 22:16, the catching up of John from earth to heaven has been taken to be a symbolic representation of the translation of the Church as occurring before the events of tribulation described in chaps. 6-19.”

Several reasons weigh against this common pre-tribulation rapture interpretation.

1. This understanding of the rapture is a novel interpretation, not proposed before the Puritan preachers, Increase and Cotton Mather, in the eighteenth century. It was popularized in England by John Darby and the Plymouth Brethren in the 1830s, and then in the United States in the early 20th century by the Scofield Reference Bible.
2. It reads a meaning into “Come up here” (4:1) that is completely unrelated to the context.
3. The *context* of the primary passage that describes a rapture (1 Thess 4:17) links it to the glorious return of Christ, the last trumpet, the general resurrection of the dead, and the beginning of eternal life with the Lord—not to a temporary millennial kingdom.

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ *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.*

One of my students, Matthew Daniel, wrote a paper in which he promised to show *the exact day* on which the rapture will occur! I doubted him, but his argument is sound. He wrote:

The “rapture”... shall not occur until the last day. As Jesus says in John 6:44: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise [*anistemi*] him on the last day.” And Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17: “...the dead in Christ will rise [*anistemi*] first. 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.”

While we would not want to rest too much weight on the use of the same word in both contexts, the link between the rapture of 1 Thess 4:16-17 and the general resurrection seems clear.

4. Fourth, the normal meaning of the Greek words in 1 Thess 4:17 translated “to meet” (*eis apantēsin*) is that of people going out to meet someone, and then of escorting that person back to where they came from (the same Greek expression is found in Matt

25:6 and Acts 28:15). Thus 1 Thess 4:17 most likely refers to Christians being caught up to meet and welcome Christ at the time of his glorious return before returning with him to live forever on a renewed earth.

The *pastoral danger* of the doctrine that believers will “fly away” before the time of tribulation is that it erroneously reassures Christians that they will be spared the great trial and the rise of antichrist at history’s end, which the New Testament in general and Christian tradition emphasize that Church will need to endure.^v That could leave those who accept this interpretation unprepared for a severe trial that Revelation says will require perseverance (13:10; 14:12) and perhaps render them more vulnerable to the deception that Scripture warns will characterize that period (2 Thess 2:9-12; Rev 13:14).

Where Does Millennialist Interpretation Go Wrong?

I think there are a few basic mistakes that characterize millennialist interpretations of Revelation.

First, they tend to interpret too literally a genre of biblical literature that is highly symbolic (pp. 27-29). In the Bible, dreams and visions almost always depict reality in symbolic, non-literal terms—consider Joseph’s dreams or the visions of Amos, Ezekiel, Zechariah, or Daniel.^{vi} The symbolic nature of biblical dreams and visions does not make them void of historical or prophetic meaning. But their symbolic nature does mean we have to think deeply about what they mean, and even so, may not understand unless we receive divine revelation of their meaning, or wait and see how they are fulfilled.

Second, although it is true that Revelation presents a narrative that begins with the slaughtered Lamb’s exaltation (Rev 4-5) and concludes with the full establishment of God’s kingdom (Rev 21-22), millennialism usually interprets this narrative in a linear fashion, as though the Revelation present events in chronological order. In fact the plot of Revelation unfolds in a circular or spiral way (see introduction, pp. 23-26), cycling several times through combinations of key elements of the story (recapitulation):

- the troubles that afflict the earth before the end of history (e.g., 6:1-8; 8:1-12; 9:1-17; 16:2-11),
- the tribulation that the Church passes through before the end (7:13-14; 11:7-10; 12:6, 13-17; 13:5-10, 15-17; 18:24; 19:19; 20:7-9),
- the role of the Church before Christ’s return (7:3-8; 11:1, 3-6; 14:1-5),
- God’s interim provision in heaven for the faithful departed (6:9-11; 7:9-17; 15:2-4; 20:4-6),
- the run-up to judgment day and the final defeat of evil (6:12-17; 14:16-20; 16:12-21; 19:17-18, 20-21; 20:9-15),
- the victory of Christ and salvation of his people (5:5-14; 7:9-17; 11:11-12; 12:7-11; 14:14-16; 19:11-16)
- the fullness of God’s reign and dwelling (temple) in the New Jerusalem on a new earth (chs 21 and 22).

Third, millennialist interpretations seeks to find in Revelation and to predict what will happen in the period before Christ's return with an unwarranted degree of specificity related to current events. The inaccuracy of these predictions usually becomes evident with the passing of time. One can see this by reading the application to current events in Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) or Tim LaHaye's and Jerry Jenkins' *Are We Living in the Last Times* (1999). Our best clue for how well we will be able to predict the events leading up to the second coming of Christ is to look at how biblical prophecy predicted the first coming of Christ. In *hindsight* we can see how Christ fulfilled the Old Testament Scriptures, but no one was able to study the prophecies and figure out in advance precisely how God was going to save his people. It seems more likely that the Lord is keeping his precise plan to himself (perhaps this is what Rev 10:3-4 implies) and that only afterwards will we be able to see how his actions fulfilled his words.

That doesn't mean that we should not study and seek to discern how biblical prophecies about the end are in the process of being fulfilled in our day—we should. 2 Peter 1:19 exhorts us,

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

This kind of attentiveness to biblical prophecy is evident in the New Testament, not only in Revelation, which gives it major attention, but other books as well (e.g., 2 Thess 2:3-7; 2 Tim 3:1-9; 2 Pet 3; 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3). But the Lord's purpose for prophecy is not to give us an advance script, but to rouse our hearts to spiritual readiness to discern the temptations and overcome the trials of our time so as to be those "blessed... servants whom the master finds awake when he comes" (Luke 12:37).

Fourth, millennialist interpretation reads into Revelation a distinction between Israel and the Church that was not in the mind of the author. When Revelation was written the Church understood itself as eschatological Israel, now expanded to include Gentiles joined to Israel's Messiah through faith and baptism (see "Israel and the Church," p. 209). Thus the woman in Rev 12 represents both Israel and the Church (and Mary as well). Unlike Romans 9-11, Revelation does not take up the subject of God's plan for Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. Nor does Revelation concern itself with or speak of the land of Israel or what Paul calls "present Jerusalem" (Gal 4:25). When Revelation refers to Zion, "the beloved city," "Armageddon," "Sodom," and indeed all locations, except for Patmos and the locations of the seven churches, it uses these place names as types and symbols.

Finally, rather than begin with the clearer texts from the New Testament about the return of the Lord and the interpretation of the early Church embodied in the creeds, millennialist interpretation often builds on doubtful interpretations of obscure visionary and apocalyptic texts to shape its understanding of the end of history. A wiser procedure is to start with what is clearer in the teaching of the New Testament and of the creeds and then to see if it is possible to fit the difficult texts, like the thousand-year reign of Rev 20:4-6, into that picture.

Final Word

Although I have concluded that the millennialist interpretation of Rev 20 is mistaken, I regard the brothers and sisters who hold this view with love and respect. I appreciate their faith in Scripture as the word of God and their earnest desire to understand it and to obey it. They seek

to read the book of Revelation in the light of the whole Bible and its teaching about the end of history, as I also do. I found it interesting to discover that the great St. Augustine sought to do the same thing (see Book 20 of his *City of God*), although I also object to Augustine's interpretation of "the first resurrection" (see *Revelation*, pp. 325-26, 329).^{vii} It is possible to both disagree with other interpretations and to simultaneously appreciate the spirit of faith that animates them.

Undoubtedly, there are also mistakes in my interpretation of Revelation. That humbling realization gives me a sense of spiritual kinship with millennialists, with St. Augustine, and with all the faithful believers through the centuries who have carefully and prayerfully studied Revelation, yet made mistakes in interpreting it. As Paul says,

"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12).

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ⁱ Those who believe in a literal earthly millennium disagree on the precise chronology of the rapture and the tribulation, whether Christ will return and rapture the Church before seven years of tribulation (pre-tribulationism), before the final three-and-a-half-year great tribulation period (mid-tribulationism), or after the tribulation (post-tribulationism).

ⁱⁱ C.I. Scofield, *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), notes on 20:2, 4; p. 1373.

ⁱⁱⁱ I suspect that the mention of death and sin in Isa 65:20 is the reason. ("No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.") However, why can't this verse simply be a poetic way of referring to eternal life before the doctrine of resurrection became clear? That's how Christians have interpreted Ps 23:6 ("and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for length of days [literal translation]).

^{iv} For more on the ways that the final battles of Rev 19 and 20 both reflect the one final battle of Ezek 38-30, see G.K. Beale and Sean McDonough, "Revelation," in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1144-45. For a thoughtful presentation of the view that expects a literal thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, see Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 696-718.

^v See Matt 24:9-24; Luke 21:12-19; 2 Thess 2:3-17; 2 Tim 3:1-13; 1 Pet 4:1, 12-19; 1 John 2:18 and Catechism 675-677 and sidebar, "The Great Tribulation," pp. 146-47).

^{vi} The only exception I can think of are visions of Christ or an angel appearing with an announcement or command (e.g., Luke 1, Acts 9).

^{vii} In this I follow the interpretation of my former professor, Albert Vanhoye, *The Old Testament Priests and the New Priest* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's, 1980), 304.