



Premillennialism

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Introduction

'Premillennialism' is a Christian theological term used to describe beliefs relating to the second coming of Jesus and the establishment of the Millennium. Unlike the category [millenarianism](#), which is often applied to a variety of religious and secular movements that emphasize a 'general golden age or end times', premillennialism is a specifically Christian theological category. The modifier 'pre' in premillennialism is operative, as it defines the point at which the second coming of Jesus is expected to occur. Premillennialism therefore refers to Jesus's return *prior* to the Millennium.

Premillennialism in Early Christian Theology

In the context of Christian theology, the Millennium is a utopian period based on the description of Jesus's return in Revelation 20. James Tabor (2011, 252) notes:

This specification of a precise period of one thousand years [in Revelation 20:1-10], during which Satan is prevented from deceiving the nations of the world and a select group of redeemed humans reign with Christ, gave rise to the term millennium (Latin mille, 'thousand'; the equivalent term in Greek is chalias, which in English becomes chiliasm).

The writings of early Church Fathers such as Irenaeus and Justin Martyr display premillennial tendencies, in that they [expected the physical and material return of Jesus to establish earthly political rule](#) (Gribben 2011, 22-23). Due to the chronology of its emergence, this aspect of the early Church Fathers' writing is often described as 'historic' premillennialism. By the third century ce literal views of the Millennium were less significant, and the apocalyptic interpretations of Revelation fell firmly out of favour (Bonner 1989; Tabor 2011, 262). The publication of Augustine's *City of God* in the fifth century played a crucial role in transforming the concept of the Millennium from a material to a symbolic entity (Bonner 1989; Gribben 2011; Tabor 2011; Ariel 2013). According to Bietenhard (1953), Christians increasingly identified any literal interpretations of the Millennium with the 'inferior' views of the 'Jews', who had expected an earthly rather than a heavenly kingdom. This view would become mainstream within Christianity for centuries to come.

Premillennialism and the Protestant Reformation

While not disappearing entirely, it was not until the Protestant Reformation that materialist forms of millennialism began to regain widespread appeal (Lewis 2010; Ariel 2013, 36). In the seventeenth century, premillennialist writing abounded from authors on both sides of the Atlantic who sought to make sense of the social crises they observed. For example, Catholic emancipation, agitation leading up to the British Reform Act (1832), and an outbreak of cholera that killed tens of thousands (1832) resulted in premillennial writers linking these events and the growth of popular republicanism to the [prophesied](#) tyranny of the [Antichrist](#) (Gribben 2011, 76). During this period, arguments about the shape and timing of the Millennium increased and it was through this process that the boundaries of modern concepts such as premillennialism, [postmillennialism](#), and amillennialism began to emerge (Gribben 2011, 37-50, 76-77; Ariel 2013, 35-36).

Historicist Premillennialism

At the turn of the nineteenth century, *historicist* premillennialism was thriving in Britain and the United States (Boyer 1992, 81-86; Ariel 2013, 36). Historicism (not to be confused with historic premillennialism) is a hermeneutical system that understands biblical [prophecies](#) to detail the course of human history in the period before the second coming (Gribben 2011, xii). Therefore, current events could be interpreted as the literal fulfilment of biblical [prophecy](#). One common motif within historicist premillennialism during this period was to identify the pope and the Roman Catholic Church with the [Antichrist](#) described in the Book of Daniel, while also finding the fulfilment of biblical prophecies in social conflicts such as the English Civil War, the French Revolution, the American Civil War, and World War I. Notable historicists include William Miller (1782-1849), the father of 'Millerism', who used the Book of Daniel to calculate the precise date of the return of Jesus and determined that it would be in either 1843 or 1844 (Boyer 1992, 82-84; Gribben 2011, 75-76).

Other examples of historicism include the Methodist minister Samuel Davies Baldwin (1818-1866), who claimed that the Bible's [prophetic](#) references to Israel were in fact references to the United States (Baldwin 1854). As with most premillennialists, Baldwin relied heavily on the Books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation to explain how current events fulfilled or would fulfil biblical [prophecy](#). With reference to the invasion of Israel described in Ezekiel 38, Baldwin predicted that the United States (as Israel) would be invaded by a Russian-led European alliance that would be annihilated by the 'Christian Israel' (the United States), which would then exercise dominion over the whole world. As part of this theory, Baldwin (1854) strongly criticized the belief that 'Israel would be restored nationally to Palestine' as 'absurd, fanatical, and repugnant to scripture, as well as to common sense' (64-65).

Unlike in views like Baldwin's, the fate of Jews was an important part of other forms of historicist premillennialist thinking (see Whalen 1996; Lewis 2010; Ariel 2013). In Britain, Charles Spurgeon (1834-92) viewed the restoration and conversion of Jews as important steps in the [prophetic](#) timetable, a view which inspired both support for Jewish restoration to Palestine and missionary activity (Spurgeon 1864; Ariel 2013, 36). Similarly, in the United States in the early nineteenth century, there was a considerable literature that identified conversion and restoration of Jews to Palestine as divinely ordained

tasks of the United States that would help bring about the Millennium (Whalen 1996, 225). Such views were important in the development of early political support for Jewish restoration to Palestine, as exemplified in the Balfour Declaration in 1917 (Lewis 2010). While Jews play an important role in these premillennialist visions, they are not seen as distinct entities in the way that [dispensationalists](#) (see below) understand them.

Futurist Premillennialism

Although historicist versions of premillennialism had a considerable following, for a variety of reasons, they, along with the once popular [postmillennialism](#) in the United States (Moorhead 1984), were eventually supplanted by futurist varieties of premillennialism. The most notable and influential form of futurist premillennialism, known as [dispensationalism](#), was developed in Britain in the 1830s by John Nelson Darby (1800–82). Dispensationalism is futurist because it anticipates the fulfilment of all outstanding biblical [prophecy](#) to occur in the final seven years prior to Jesus's return. According to Darby, God dealt with humanity in a series of '[dispensations](#).' Importantly, within this interpretive paradigm, although Bible prophecy has much to reveal about past and future dispensations, it is silent on the present one, known as the Church Age (Boyer 1992, 87–88). According to Darby, the Christian church had not replaced Israel and therefore had no [prophecies](#) of its own; all prophecies relating to Israel would be fulfilled by Israel. The [prophetic](#) silence about the present age was due to its existence within what some referred to as 'the great parenthesis' that existed between the crucifixion of Jesus and the Great Tribulation (see e.g., MacKintosh n.d., 101–2; Weber 2004, 45–66). From Darby's point of view, the only event that Christians needed to look forward to was the 'Rapture' of the church, which would remove 'true' Christians from the earth for a period of seven years, marking the end of the Church Age, or 'dispensation', and restarting the prophetic clock. Like other premillennialists, [dispensationalists](#) drew (and draw) heavily on the Books of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation to provide an overview of what will happen during the Great Tribulation. These events include the ingathering of Jews to Palestine, the reinstatement of Temple sacrifice, and the rise of the [Antichrist](#), who will eventually enact a programme of severe persecution on Jews and other Christian converts 'left behind' in the Rapture. Other [prophesied](#) events include the invasion of Israel by a Russian and Persian army, which will culminate in the battle of [Armageddon](#), at which point Christ will return with the Raptured church to crush the enemies of Israel, judge the nations of the world, and establish the millennial kingdom.

The establishment of Israel in 1948 and its expansion in 1967 brought some elements of historicism back into premillennialists' interpretation of [prophecy](#). Many conceded and celebrated that this event was the fulfilment of biblical prophecy and that the Rapture of the church and Jesus's return would occur within a generation of these events (Talbot 1948; Bell 1967; Lindsey 1970).

The varieties of premillennialism that have emerged over the past three hundred years have always been products of their specific cultural and political contexts, despite their champions and some modernist critics often placing them in the 'plain meaning' of scripture or a 'literal' reading of the Bible. Current events contribute to which aspects of [prophecy](#) are highlighted in a certain time period, and, as with the case of the establishment of Israel, they can alter how some prophecy is interpreted altogether.

Further Reading

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