Is Premillennialism a Defensible Academic Theological Position? Yes, But...

By Luke T. Geraty
Introduction

In this essay I consider whether or not premillennialism is an academically¹ defensible position. I will trace the lines and explore the historic, biblical, and theological foundations of premillennialism to make the case that premillennialism is defensible but that we should not insist that it is the only academically defensible viewpoint. Rather, our exegetical, theological, and epistemological sensitivity should lead us to conclude that there is diversity in what can be considered academically defensible, especially in light of eschatology.

The Historic, Biblical, and Theological Foundations of Premillennialism

Premillennialism is the eschatological view that states: “the millennium follows the return of Christ, which therefore makes his return ‘premillennial.’”² Blomberg and Chung expand this definition by writing that:

[P]remillennialism refers to the conviction that Christ will return at the end of human history as we know it, prior to a long period of time, depicted in Revelation 20:1-7 as a thousand years, in which he reigns on earth, creating a golden era of peace and happiness for all believers alive at the time of his return, along with all believers of past eras who are resurrected, and glorified at this time.³

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¹ The *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003) defines “academic” in the sense of “relating to, or associated with an academy or school especially of higher learning,” “based on formal study especially at an institution of higher learning,” or “conforming to the traditions or rules of a school (as of literature or art) or an official academy.” Additionally, the term is often used in connection with scholarly work and is related to whether a view is considered “reasonable” or “convincing.” I acknowledge that the use of the words “reasonable” and “convincing” require a bit of epistemic humility. Whether this paper is considered a convincing academic defense will be up to the reader!


Premillennialism currently has two primary types, historic\(^4\) and dispensational
premillennialism,\(^5\) while scholars also acknowledge differences between the premillennialism of
the early church and the more recent Protestant premillennialism.\(^6\)

Premillennialism is found early within the Patristics, “including Papias (c. 60–c. 130),
Justin (c. 100–c. 165), Irenaeus, Tertullian, Victorinus of Pettau (d. c. 304) and Lactantius (c.
240–c. 320).”\(^7\) Walvoord states that “not one adherent, not one line of evidence is produced
sustaining that any first-century Christians held Augustinian Amillennialism… Further, there is
no evidence whatever that premillennialism was even disputed [because] it was the
overwhelming-majority view of the early church.”\(^8\) Kaiser writes that “nearly everybody will
agree that the major millennial view of the early church in its first three or so centuries was a
premillennial position”\(^9\) and Allen states that “premillennialism was the dominant position
among the ante-Nicene church fathers.”\(^10\) Vos, though not a premillennialist, suggests that “[t]his


\(^{5}\) Cf. John Walvoord, \textit{The Millennial Kingdom: A Basic Text in Premillennial Theology} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 119-120; Jack S. Deere, “Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4-6,” \textit{Bibl...c. 130), Justin (c. 100–c. 165), Irenaeus, Tertullian, Victorinus of Pettau (d. c. 304) and Lactantius (c. 240–c. 320).” Walvoord states that “not one adherent, not one line of evidence is produced sustaining that any first-century Christians held Augustinian Amillennialism… Further, there is no evidence whatever that premillennialism was even disputed [because] it was the overwhelming-majority view of the early church.” Kaiser writes that “nearly everybody will agree that the major millennial view of the early church in its first three or so centuries was a premillennial position” and Allen states that “premillennialism was the dominant position among the ante-Nicene church fathers.” Vos, though not a premillennialist, suggests that “[t]his
‘chiliastic’ division of the eschatological future… is probably of pre-Christian origin.”  

Thus premillennialists argue that their position is the first view in the history of the church.

Biblically, as Blomberg and Chung note, Premillennialists appeal to Rev. 20:1-7 as the primary text supporting their position, as they believe that their interpretation “does more justice to the natural flow of the text (from return of Christ to millennium to final judgment to new heavens and new earth).” Additionally, Premillennialists appeal to large portions of the OT, the Gospel of Matthew, Acts, Romans 9-11, and 1 Corinthians 15.

A significant premillennial argument is related to God’s faithfulness to Israel and the numerous texts that refer to its restoration. Walvoord argues that,

The prophecies given to Israel are viewed as literal and unconditional. God has promised to Israel a glorious future and this will be fulfilled after the second advent. Israel will be a glorious nation, protected from her enemies, exalted above the Gentiles, the central vehicle of the manifestation of God’s grace in the millennial kingdom… the doctrine of Israel remains one of the central features of premillennialism.

The future restoration of Israel is considered by most Premillennialists to be a significant reason to look for a millennium after Christ’s parousia. As Hess writes, “[w]ere I to look at the

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12 Revelation 20:1-7 is the only location in the NT where the word “millennium” (Gk. χιλιοί, chiliōi) appears.
14 E.g., Premillennialists, especially Dispensationalists, appeal to Gen. 12:1-7; Psalm 89; Isaiah 2:1-5; Jer. 31:35-40; Ezek. 36:16-38; Daniel 9:24-27; etc., as foundational to their interpretation.
17 Walvoord, The Millennial Kingdom, 118, 168.
20 Walvoord, The Millennial Kingdom, 136.
Old Testament and hear it as the prophets and their first audiences seem to have understood it, I would be forced to conclude that many elements specific to the restoration of Israel are yet awaiting fulfillment.”

Connected to the Abrahamic covenant and the overarching theme of the restoration of Israel, premillennialists believe that the ‘kingdom promises’ given to King David also require a future millennium. Due to these emphases, premillennialists often hold to forms of “Zionism” or strongly support the modern state of Israel.

Dispensational premillennialists consider the sine quo non of their interpretive presuppositions the idea that Israel and the church are two distinct groups that God is dealing with in unique ways.

Premillennialists appeal to church history, biblical exegesis, and their theological views related to the kingdom of God and Israel as informing their perspective. However, let’s consider two further advocates for premillennialism: Charles Spurgeon and Jürgen Moltmann.

**The Premillennialism of Charles Spurgeon and Jürgen Moltmann**

Spurgeon (1834–1892) is arguably one of the most influential Baptist pastors of all time. Hailed as the “prince of preachers,” Spurgeon’s influence and legacy as a pastor and author/preacher of popular level works continues to shape the church. Moltmann (b. 1926) is

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“without a doubt one of the three or four most widely read and influential of twentieth-century-and early-twenty-first-century theologians,” having published dozens of books and journal articles. Spurgeon was/is a popular preacher and Moltmann is an academic theologian; both are premillennialists, as we shall now see.

Beginning with Spurgeon, we find an explicitly clear statement concerning his millennial view:

If I read the word aright, and it is honest to admit that there is much room for difference of opinion here, the day will come, when the Lord Jesus will descend from heaven with a shout, with the trump of the archangel and the voice of God. Some think that this descent of the Lord will be post-millennial — that is, after the thousand years of his reign. I cannot think so. I conceive that the advent will be pre-millennial; that he will come first; and then will come the millennium as the result of his personal reign upon earth.

Furthermore, Spurgeon stated, “there is, moreover, to be a reign of Christ. I cannot read the Scriptures without perceiving that there is to be a millennial reign, as I believe, upon the earth, and that there shall be new heavens and new earth wherein dwell righteousness.”

If these two quotes are not convincing, Dennis Swanson provides a detailed examination of Spurgeon’s millennial views and demonstrates that not only did Spurgeon hold to historic premillennialism, but that he rejected both postmillennialism and amillennialism.

Turning to Moltmann, we find many provocative statements about the importance of “millenarianism” that, at face value, cannot be considered distinctly premillennial. For example, Moltmann writes,

… there is no affirmative community between the church and Israel without the messianic hope for the kingdom. And that then means that there is no adequate Christian

27 Moltmann’s most well-known works are likely his trilogy: Theology of Hope (1964), The Crucified God (1972), and The Church in the Power of the Spirit (1975).
eschatology without millenarianism. Eschatology is more than millenarianism, but millenarianism is its historical relevance. It is only the millenarian hope in Christian eschatology which unfolds an earthly and historical future for the church and Israel… Millenarianism looks towards future history, the history of the end…

What does Moltmann mean when he discusses “millenarianism”? Questions concerning Moltmann’s “millenarianism” are, in my estimation, based more on semantics than on theological differences in that Moltmann does not use traditional terms such as “premillennialism,” “postmillennialism,” or “amillennialism” consistently or in a way that most systematic theologians do. However, Moltmann clearly rejects “Historical Millenarianism” (Amillennialism) and accepts “Eschatological Millenarianism” (Premillennialism) in The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology. Moltmann makes an important clarification when he writes that,

… the resurrection from the dead necessarily leads into a reign of Christ before the universal raising of the dead for the Last Judgment. That is to say, it leads into a messianic kingdom in history before the end of the world, or into a transitional kingdom leading from this transitory world-time to the new world that is God's. This hope is clearly evident in Paul [Phil. 3:10f].

Not all understand Moltmann as a clear premillennialist. Bauckham raises this issue when he states that “Moltmann fails to distinguish between the two types of futurist millenarianism: premillenarianism and postmillenarianism (or premillennialism and postmillennialism).” However, Moltmann provides clarification when he responds to Bauckham by writing, “I

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33 This is seen in that Moltmann starts chapter three, section seven, with the title “Historical Millenarianism No—Eschatological Millenarianism Yes.” One simply needs to read pp. 192–202 in order to determine he is discussing what is generally referred to as amillennialism and premillennialism.
understand [the millennium] theologically. Christ's kingdom of peace is evidently associated with hope for Israel's future in the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel in the kingdom of the Son of man (Daniel 7). But for Christians this kingdom of the Son of man is identical with Christ's kingdom of peace at the end of time. 

Moreover, Moltmann states, “Christian millenarianism has had a clearly detectible affinity to Israel. It is only here that the theological recognition of Israel's enduring vocation, and the hope for Israel's future, are really preserved.”

This reads strikingly similar to the previously mentioned premillennial commitments to a future eschatological place for ethnic Israel and is connected to Moltmann’s agreement that “hand in hand with expectation of the overthrow of the Antichrist went the expectation of Israel's redemption and the establishment of Christ's thousand years' empire.”

One is hard pressed to argue that Moltmann does not argue for premillennial theology.

In light of the reality that Premillennialism finds support in church history, is based on reasonable exegesis and theological concepts, and finds support by none other than Spurgeon and Moltmann, I believe it’s fair to state that the view should be considered a defensible academic theological position. At the very least we should acknowledge that Christians throughout history have considered it persuasive and have good reason to do so.

**A Defensible Academic Theological Position? Yes, But…**

While premillennialism is a legitimate viewpoint and well within the boundaries of orthodoxy, there are significant challenges that must be considered. This is to say that premillennialism is a defensible view but it cannot be considered the only legitimate

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37 Ibid., 1695-1696.
38 Ibid., 1702-1703.
eschatological option. Pushing against the premillennial hermeneutic with just as reasonable exegesis and theological framework, in addition to the evidence from church history, is amillennialism. In the same way that we have explored the historic, biblical, and theological arguments for premillennialism, hereafter will be a brief critical evaluation of premillennialism in light of amillennialism in the hopes that a humble, honest, and informed approach to premillennialism can take place.

Amillennialists are quick to challenge the assertion that premillennialism has outright dominance in the Patristic era. Despite that amillennialists often argue from silence, one must acknowledge that they are indeed correct when they reject Kaiser’s statement that the major view of the millennium in the early church was the premillennial position. Hippolytus (170–235), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – c. 215), Origen (184/185 – 253/254), and Cyprian (c. 200–258) were all amillennial, not to mention the magisterial Augustine of Hippo (354–430). Based on the fact that each of these early church fathers were largely orthodox and heavily influential toward developing theological views that are still held today, it would seem that premillennialists

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42 Amillennialists often make much of the fact that many patristic writers simply do not mention the millennium in their works. However, this does not necessarily mean that they did not hold to premillennial views but that their views on the millennium either were not covered or have not survived. For two helpful summaries of patristic eschatology, see Charles E. Hill, Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity, second edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); Gary DeMar and Francis X. Gumerlock, “Premillennialism and the Early Church,” in The Early Church and the End of the World (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2006), 39-64.


44 This is not the place to discuss questions concerning Origen’s orthodoxy!
need to abandon statements of patristic exclusivity. As the often quoted Justin Martyr acknowledged to Trypho, “many who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise."

When surveying the biblical data, challenges to premillennialism are raised concerning the “natural flow” of Revelation, as well as the hermeneutical issues related to the apocalyptic genre. Storms states that amillennialism “makes more sense of the structure of the book of Revelation” due to its acknowledgement of “the principle of recapitulation, or progressive parallelism.” Amillennialism is said to better view St. Paul’s use of Isaiah 25:8 in 1 Cor. 15:50-55 as well as correctly understands “the New Testament teaching (2 Pet. 3: 8-13) that the new heavens and new earth will be inaugurated at the time of Christ’s second coming, not 1,000 years thereafter.” Storms also notes that amillennialism understands that Acts 15 indicates that “the rebuilding of the tent (or tabernacle) of David refers not to a restoration of ethnic or national Israel in a post-parousia millennial earth, but rather to the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus to the throne of David and the ingathering of souls, in this present church age, from among the Gentiles.”

Furthermore, in response to the premillennial claims regarding the future restoration of Israel and the Holy Land, amillennialism contends that the “prophesied restoration of Israel is

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fulfilled in the Church, the true Israel of God.”

Hoekema states that “the New Testament itself often interprets expressions relating to Israel in such a way as to apply them to the New Testament church.”

Even some premillennialists agree. For example, Schnabel writes that “the prophets’ promise of a future restoration of Israel to land continued to be connected with covenant fidelity.” Ladd, in stronger terms, writes, “Old Testament prophecies must be interpreted in the light of the New Testament to find their deeper meaning… I do not see how it is possible to avoid the conclusion that the New Testament applies Old Testament prophecies to the New Testament church and in so doing identifies the church as spiritual Israel.”

**Conclusion**

Premillennialism has historic, biblical, and theological merits and one seems hard pressed to deny that it is an academically defensible viewpoint. In addition to evidence from the early church and biblical/theological proposals, premillennialism has been held by many significant Christian leaders, including Charles Spurgeon and Jürgen Moltmann. In my mind, this carries powerful theological weight.

Yet under the critical evaluation of amillennialism, premillennialism is presented with challenges. These challenges, as far as I am concerned, preclude me from suggesting that premillennialism should have eschatological dominance. Academically defensible? Yes, but… not the only academically defensible eschatological position to hold.

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Bibliography


