

Premillennialism - What is it?

First a short note. "Premillennialism" is not directly related to "pretribulationism." "Tribulation" beliefs are in reference to when the rapture will take place with respect to the tribulation. Pretribulationism is the belief that the rapture will occur before the beginning of the seven-year tribulation. Midtribulationism is the belief that the rapture will occur at the center point of the tribulation. And posttribulationism is the belief the rapture won't occur until after the tribulation. "Millennialism" beliefs are in reference to when Christ will reign in respect to the millennial kingdom. Premillennialism is the belief that Jesus will come to Earth, conquer the world, and literally reign over all the nations at the beginning of the millennial kingdom. Postmillennialism is the belief that the church is responsible for spiritually conquering the world and preparing it for the coming of Jesus at the end of the millennium. Amillennialism, an idea held by the catholic churches, is the belief that Jesus will not literally reign on earth, but that either His reign is over the spirits of the glorified saints now in heaven or His kingdom is a figurative one, being expressed in the saved hearts of all His believers here on earth.

Despite what some would wish, the Bible was not written in a dry, colourless language. It was written rich with imagery, metaphors, and parables, reflecting the cultures and idioms of the writers and their audience. Because of this, we're enticed to study it, day after day, year after year, to try and discern all its glorious levels of meaning. We learn more as we study, discovering hidden gems in a passage we first read years ago, and pausing in wonder at a new insight to a familiar verse. This abundance of imagery and metaphor and cultural influence has a downside, however. It encourages some readers to assume more symbolism than actually exists, which twists a descriptive metaphor into an unintended view of theology. There are two major problems with this method. The first is that if a text was written literally, it should be interpreted literally or the correct interpretation will not be found. The second is that if a book of truth can have different interpretations for different people, it cannot be said to be truth at all. The proper way to interpret Scripture is literally—as the words say, so should they mean. Although metaphors and figures of speech abound, passages are taken for their intended meaning and not over-analysed. Cultural idioms are taken into account; author and audience are given proper due; and scripture is compared against other passages in the Bible on the assumption that all scripture is inspired and must, then, agree.

This little rabbit trail is necessary because the different methods of interpreting the Bible have resulted in different views of the millennium. While all support the idea of Christ reigning over His kingdom during the millennium (Revelation 20:4), they differ on many key points, such as the literalness of the thousand years, who it is will bring in the millennium, and when in the time frame Jesus will return.

The issue of when Jesus will return actually has its roots in the covenants God made with Israel that have not yet been fulfilled. The personal Abrahamic covenant has been fulfilled—Abraham did make it to the Promised Land, he did have many physical descendants, and he is the father of many nations. Several hundred years later, however, God added to His promise. The Palestinian covenant (Deuteronomy 30:1-10) established the boundaries of the land that was to belong to Israel. Israel has never ruled over these specific boundaries. They also have never been an independent nation that obeys God. The Davidic covenant that an heir of David will rule over Israel as king forever (2 Samuel 7:8-16) hasn't been fulfilled, either. Theologians agree this will be Jesus (Luke 1:32-33).

But theologians do not agree on what "Jesus will reign over His kingdom" means. Many emphasize the prophecies of the New Testament and the role of the church in the end times. The problem with this is, if you take the book of Revelation as your baseline, the covenants and prophecies in the Old Testament don't make sense. The church didn't exist in the Old Testament where the prophecies (like those found in Daniel) clearly refer to the nation of Israel. Theologians who emphasize the book of Revelation admit they cannot allow for the literal interpretation of the Old Testament text. Their response is to spiritualize the prophecies and, consequently, the theology of the Old Testament and infer that the covenants made to Israel in the Old Testament have been transferred to the church. In this way, they can say that Jesus' "kingdom" is in the hearts of His followers, not the political Israel.

Conversely, those who take the Old Testament prophecies literally can easily work the book of Revelation into their timeline. They believe that the prophecies of the end times given to Daniel, an Old Testament Jewish prophet, writing for Jews, who knew nothing about the coming church, are still for Israel. Likewise, the covenants given to Israel are for Israel alone. Jesus has yet to be a political ruler, but taking the Old Testament prophecies literally it is evident that Jesus will rule physically, politically on earth. It's also evident that Israel will be an independent nation that will serve God. The fact that this has not happened yet does not mean that the covenants have been transferred to the church; it just means the covenants will be fulfilled in the future. Premillennialism says that Jesus will come before the millennium and fulfill these covenants, and it is unnecessary to reinterpret the Old Testament prophecies to mean something the authors didn't intend.

The second controversial issue is in regards to the duration of the millennial kingdom. The word "millennium" comes from two Latin words: mille, or "thousand," and annus, or "year." A thousand-year time span doesn't mesh with a postmillennialist or amillennialist viewpoint, so some say the term refers to a long but undefined period of time. Their justification is that if God had literally meant 1000 years, He would have mentioned it in more than just one chapter in the Bible (Revelation 20). That one chapter, however, mentions it specifically no fewer than six times. As a 1000-year kingdom fits in perfectly with the idea of Jesus coming to earth and reigning as king, premillennialism holds to the literal interpretation.

The final significant issue is who exactly is to bring in the millennial kingdom. Is it the church's responsibility to reach all the world with the gospel, encourage and enforce godly standards, and, once the world is prepared, hand the keys over to Jesus? Or will Jesus arrive before the beginning of the millennium and conquer the Earth Himself? Premillennialism asserts that Revelation 19:11-20:3 is clear: the rider of the white horse, who is the Word of God, will judge and wage war. His name is King of kings and Lord of lords. He will capture the beast and the false prophet and throw them alive into the lake of fire. He will kill their armies with the sword. And then He will bind Satan with chains and throw him into the Abyss. There is nothing in that passage that indicates the millennial kingdom will come about because believers witnessed enough to turn the hearts of nations until the whole world worshiped God.

End times views are typically not salvation issues. They are ways of interpreting what we see in the world, and inspirations for what we should do with our time here. Daniel 12:9-10 promises that the wise in the end times will come to understand, but until then, the words will be "rolled up and sealed." For now, we should accept that the Bible means what it says. Premillennialism holds that if the entire Bible is the inspired Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17) it should be treated as such. It should not be subject to "spiritual interpretation" if the words given are clear. It is much better for us to admit that we don't understand everything written in the Scriptures than to try to force an interpretation that isn't truth.