

Introduction

The word “eschatology” pertains to events of the end. Although those who hold the most popular views today within the Church may try to make their case from Scripture, the Bible only teaches one message. Therefore, it behooves us to study what the Bible says and not be misled by the persuasive words of mere men. This paper will summarize the four main views that are considered orthodox within the Church today. One should not use eschatology as a basis for defining the group he accepts as Christian. The last three of these views were held throughout Church history, and the first view, the most popular today, is held by Bible believing Christians throughout the Western world. The popularity of the view and the sincerity of the adherents are quite irrelevant, however. Is the view internally consistent? Does it follow from Scripture alone, or does it require some additional considerations? These are the most important questions, questions to which I will endeavor to present answers herein.

Definitions

Rapture: A secret event that ushers in the Great Tribulation (future) in which all believers are removed from the earth and taken to “be with the Lord” while life goes on for those who are left on earth.

Antichrist: In the last days a “man of sin” will arise who will ascend to great political and evil spiritual power, becoming the world ruler after the rapture. He will make a covenant with Israel and later break it, ushering in the Great Tribulation period. He will be destroyed by the brightness of the coming of Jesus.

Great Tribulation: A seven-year period during which the Antichrist will rule the earth. During the last half of this period the wrath of God will be poured out on the unbelieving world and, in particular, the nation of Israel. As a result most Israelis will die, but most who survive will accept Jesus.

Second Coming of Jesus: A visible event in which Jesus bodily returns to earth, ending the Great Tribulation and ushering in the Millennium.

The Millennium: A literal 1000-year period during which the Lord Jesus Christ will personally reign on earth from Jerusalem. It is at this time that the Jewish sacrificial system will be restored, and worship will be restored to a literal temple.

The Kingdom: The Kingdom is another name for the absolute rule of Christ in the Millennium and of God the Father in the eternal state. It has nothing at all to do with the Church at this point in history.

The New Heavens and the New Earth: The meaning of this phrase refers to either the Millennial Kingdom, during which time the Lord Jesus Christ will be ruling the world from His throne in Jerusalem, or to the future eternal state of the righteous in Heaven. The context of usage dictates which is the meaning. For example, 2 Peter 3:10 refers to the Millennial Kingdom while Revelation 21 refers to heaven.

A summary of this view can be seen in Figure 1.

How Various Eschatological Passages are Explained

Daniel 2:37 – 45: Although the first three kingdoms mentioned were fulfilled before the time of Christ, the fourth (symbolized by the feet and toes) stretches from the ancient Roman empire to a period nearly 2000 years later to a “reconstituted” Roman empire. The kingdom that will never be destroyed (verse 44) is the kingdom of God, which collectively refers to the Millennial Kingdom and the eternal abode of the righteous in Heaven. One must stretch the time out in this manner because Dispensational Premillennial (or DP – also called pre-tribulationalism) hermeneutics will not allow interpreting verse 44 to be the Church.

Daniel 9:24 – 27 (The 70-Week Prophecy): This prophecy predicts 70 weeks of years (i.e., 490 years) to be fulfilled concerning Israel, starting from the “going forth of the commandment to restore and build Jerusalem” (about 456 B.C.). Messiah comes after 483 of these years (Jesus’ baptism in 26 A.D.), and then a gap occurs. The gap (of at least 1967 years) must be a secret, because the Old Testament prophets did not foresee the Church. The 70th week (the other seven years) is fulfilled during the Great Tribulation that will happen after the rapture of the Church. Verse 27 refers to the Antichrist.

Ezekiel 40 – 47 (Ezekiel’s Temple): The vision of Ezekiel is fulfilled during the Millennial Kingdom during which time the Jewish sacrificial system will be restored in their rebuilt temple.

The Olivet Discourse and the Book of Revelation: Although some of what Christ taught was fulfilled in the years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., there is a sense in which the Olivet discourse (found in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21) and Revelation are all future. The futuristic interpretation of these prophetic passages hinges on the meaning of the phrase “this generation” which can only mean that generation alive when Israel became a nation (the “budding of the fig tree”) in 1948 A.D. The prophecies in the book of Revelation cover the entire Church age, which is depicted by seven local churches. The character of the Church during different parts of the Church age is seen in the nature of the rebukes to these churches. We are now living in the time of the Laodicean Church characterized by lukewarmness.

1 Corinthians 15:50; 1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:11: These passages refer to the rapture of the Church just before the seven-year Great Tribulation. It seems that they must also apply to another resurrection of people who become believers during the great tribulation. Neither of these is the second resurrection implied in Revelation 20, although the rapture is equated with the first resurrection of Revelation 20.

2 Thessalonians 2:1 – 12: These passages refer to the rapture of the Church just before the seven-year Great Tribulation. “He who restrains” is the Holy Spirit who is taken away when the Church is raptured. The Antichrist is the man of sin, who cannot be revealed until the rapture has occurred.

2 Peter 3:1 – 13: These passages refer to all the events leading up to the time of the end, including the bodily second coming of Jesus. This is immediately followed by the Millennial Kingdom (“new heaven and new earth” from verse 13). The rapture is not explicitly mentioned in this passage.

Revelation 20: The first resurrection is the same as the rapture. The name stems from the fact that believers who are dead will be resurrected, while those who are alive will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. The second resurrection (implied) occurs at the end of the Millennium when the “rest of the dead” (all unbelievers who have physically died – the first death, by implication) will be resurrected to face judgment and sentencing to Hell (the second death). Although it is called the second resurrection, DPs really consider it to be a third resurrection (see discussion under 1 Corinthians 15:50f).

Philosophical Issues

Prime Hermeneutical Principles: Literalism is said to be the prime rule of interpretation of all Scripture. A passage is to be taken literally unless doing so would lead to absurdity. This position is strongly dispensational and therefore opposed to a covenantal interpretative scheme. Israel is emphasized heavily as a central point of God’s dealing with man. Old Testament prophets wrote of Israel, not the Church. When the Bible speaks of Israel, it means the nation that is presently in the middle East; Israel is not the Church. God has two covenant peoples: Israel (permanent) and the Church (temporary). The Church age was a total mystery and merely a “parenthesis” which was not at all recognized by the Old Testament writers. The Millennial Kingdom represents a return to God’s original plan of working with His covenant people (the Jews).

Present View of Israel: Events in present-day Israel are said to be signs for the Church concerning that which God is about to do. Israel will again be the subject of God’s wrath in the Great Tribulation, with most of the nation perishing therein. Of the relatively small number of survivors, many will come to accept Jesus. The Jewish sacrificial system will be reinstated in the Millennium.

Imminence of the Second Coming of Jesus: The imminence of Jesus’ coming means that it can happen any time. It should be noted, however, that for the dispensational premillennialist (DP) imminence applies only to the rapture, since the Second Coming is seven years later and cannot happen until the rapture and great tribulation are finished. Since the rapture must precede these events, then the second coming cannot be imminent.

History: The view originated with Darby (1825 A.D.) and has been held by Plymouth Brethren and many Baptists. It was popularized by the Schofield reference Bible. The view is now held by such writers as Lindsey, Walvoord, Feinberg, Ryrie, Hunt, Whisenant, and Ice.

The Last Days: The “last days” refers to that period immediately before the rapture. Most DPs believe we are right now in the last days, but we have not always been. That is, they see the events of these days in which we live to be lining up with the predictions in the Olivet discourse and the book of Revelation. Others believe that the early Church (including writers of the Bible) thought they were also in the time of the very end. Finally, there are those who believe that the

term “last days” is just a term used in the New Testament to refer to all that time between the first and second comings of Jesus.

How We Should Live: The world will get worse and worse before the rapture, which could be at any minute – even before you finish reading this sentence! Jesus said to watch, pray, and occupy until He comes. The most important activity in the minds of DPs is simply to preach the gospel. Most, but not all, DPs are opposed to any activities that have longterm goals, including political involvement. Their rationale is simple and direct: “Why polish the brass on a sinking ship?” This seems consistent with the DP view. DPs view the Law as “having been fulfilled” and therefore are divided concerning the use of the Law as a basis for ethics (although most would oppose it); most would scoff at the likelihood of success for any longterm efforts toward cultural reform through theonomy (institution of biblical laws). Many DPs are thorough in their knowledge of and respect for the Bible. They believe they have a healthier view of heavenly things than those who hold other eschatological views, and they certainly talk more of eschatology (and study it more) than most Christians who hold the other views.

Weaknesses: The reinstitution of animal sacrifices, the lack of any passages of Scripture that explicitly teach the distinctive features of the position (such as the “secret” rapture), the view that the rapture could take place any time which contradicts the view that the seven churches are assigned to different epochs of the Church age, and not taking the “time texts” literally (in spite of their insistence that they alone take the Bible literally when it comes to eschatology), are all problem areas. Although many DPs work toward long-term goals (e.g., Tim LaHaye), long-term goals are really inconsistent with this view. Unfortunately, several of our brethren who hold this view have taken to “date setting” (Hal Lindsey, Arthur Whisenant, etc.). Although many DPs would say that they abhor the extreme implications of the “any minute rapture” mentality, there are few examples of DPs accomplishing anything of lasting significance. It is just not a priority when you believe that you only have a short time and that you cannot “win” anyway. Notice that those who criticize DPs are *not* saying that we shouldn’t be “ready to die” at any minute. However, there is a large difference between being ready to die and believing that the world only has a short time. In the former case, one will take care to see that loved ones are provided for in the event of an “untimely” death. In the latter case, to be consistent, one should not bother with such things. Former Secretary of Energy under Reagan, James Watt, was a DP. He took a lot of criticism for something he strongly denies having said, that taking care to not ruin the environment is unimportant since Jesus is coming soon anyway.

Orthodox Views of Eschatology

I: Dispensational Premillennialism

Dewey H. Hodges, Ph.D.
Page 5

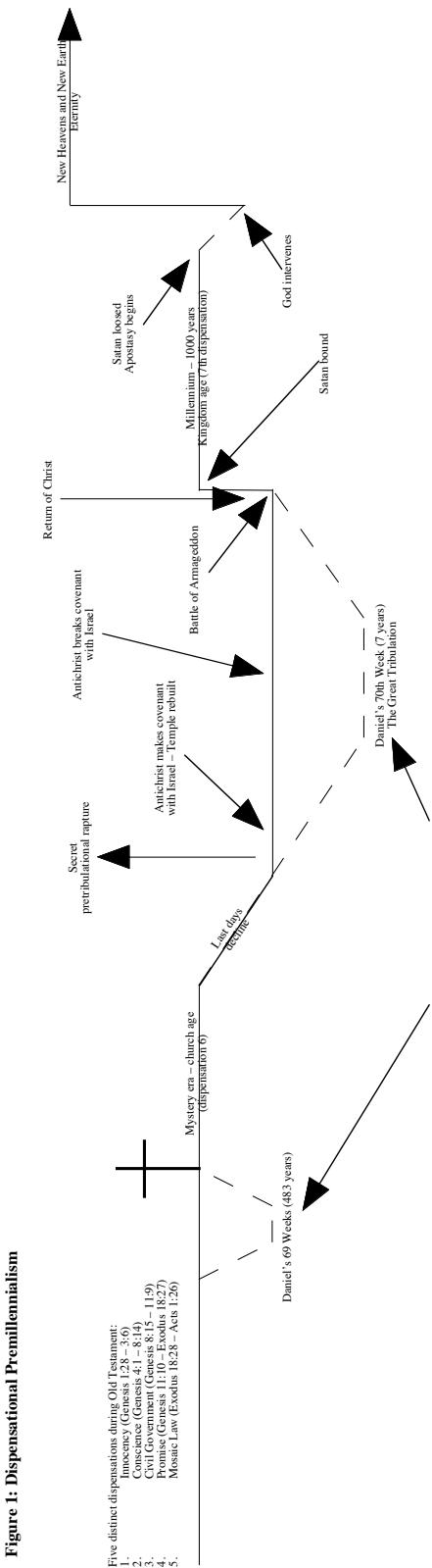


Figure 1: Dispensational Premillennialism

Definitions

Antichrist: In the last days a “man of sin” will arise who will ascend to great political and evil spiritual power, eventually becoming the world ruler. This signals the beginning of the Great Tribulation. He will be destroyed by the brightness of the second coming of Jesus.

Great Tribulation: A seven-year (or three-and-a-half-year) period during which the Antichrist will rule the earth. During this period God will pour out His wrath on the unbelieving world. Many will come to the Lord during this time, including many Israelis in fulfillment of Romans 9 – 11.

Second Coming of Jesus: A visible event in which Jesus bodily returns to earth, ending the Great Tribulation and ushering in the Millennium. According to Covenantal Premillennialists (CPs – also called “post-tribulationalists”), this event coincides with the “rapture” (the catching away of the Church), although this word is not used very much by CPs.

The Millennium: A literal 1000-year period during which the Lord Jesus Christ will personally reign on earth. Very little information exists in the writings of CPs to define exactly what happens during this time other than a period of peace and just rule. They categorically reject any notion of the reinstitution of the Jewish sacrificial system.

The Kingdom: The Kingdom of God is presently manifested in Christ’s rule of the Church and the world, but it will be more fully realized in the literal presence of Christ on earth during the Millennium and of God the Father in the eternal state.

The New Heavens and the New Earth: The meaning of this phrase refers to either the Millennial Kingdom, during which time the Lord Jesus Christ will be ruling the world from His throne in the New Jerusalem (not necessarily located where Jerusalem is today), or to the future eternal state of the righteous in Heaven. The context of usage dictates which is the meaning. For example, 2 Peter 3:10 refers to the Millennial Kingdom while Revelation 21 refers to heaven.

A summary of this view can be seen in Figure 2.

How Various Eschatological Passages are Explained

Daniel 2:37 – 45: The first three kingdoms mentioned were fulfilled before the time of Christ. The fourth, symbolized by the feet and toes, is the ancient Roman empire. The kingdom that will never be destroyed (verse 44) is the Church, although the kingdom of God only will be absolutely established in the Millennial Kingdom.

Daniel 9:24 – 27 (The 70-Week Prophecy): This prophecy predicts 70 weeks of years (i.e., 490 years) to be fulfilled concerning Israel, starting from the “going forth of the commandment to restore and build Jerusalem” (about 456 B.C.). Messiah comes after 483 of these years (Jesus’ baptism in 26 A.D.). Some say a gap occurs here; others say the gap starts after half the 70th week is over -- when Jesus dies on the cross three-and-a-half years later. The gap (of at least 1963 years) occurs because the passage refers only to Israel, and when they rejected Jesus this

prophecy was put on hold. The 70th week (or its last half) is fulfilled during the seven-year (or three-and-a-half-year) Great Tribulation. Verse 27 refers to the Messiah (Christ).

Ezekiel 40 – 47 (Ezekiel’s Temple): The vision of Ezekiel is extremely controversial among CPs. Some say it is fulfilled during the Church age and others say in the Millennium. All CPs categorically reject any inference that it refers to a restored Jewish economy, however.

The Olivet Discourse and the Book of Revelation: What Christ taught was fulfilled in the years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. However, there is dual fulfillment of these passages for the future so that all the Olivet discourse (found in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21) and Revelation have meaning for the future as well. The futuristic interpretation of these prophetic passages hinges on the meaning of the phrase “this generation” which can only mean that generation alive when Israel became a nation (the “budding of the fig tree”) in 1948 A.D.

1 Corinthians 15:50f; 1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:11: These passages refer to the second coming of Jesus just after the Great Tribulation, also called the first resurrection (Revelation 20).

2 Thessalonians 2:1 – 12: These passages refer to the Great Tribulation. “He who restrains” is God preventing the Antichrist from emerging from the world until His perfect timing. The Antichrist is the man of sin, and Jesus’ second coming cannot take place until he is revealed and becomes the ruler of the world.

2 Peter 3:1 – 13: These passages refer to events of the end times, such as the Great Tribulation and the bodily second coming of Jesus. This period is immediately followed by the Millennium (“the new heaven and new earth” from verse 13).

Revelation 20: The first resurrection occurs at the second coming. The name stems from the fact that believers who are dead will be resurrected, while those who are alive will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. The second resurrection (implied) occurs at the end of the Millennium when the “rest of the dead” (all unbelievers who have physically died – the first death, by implication) will be resurrected to face judgment and sentencing to Hell (the second death).

Philosophical Issues

Prime Hermeneutical Principles: Many passages are taken literally, but the nature of apocalyptic language is also considered when interpreting some passages. This position is strongly covenantal and therefore opposed to the dispensational interpretative scheme. The Church is emphasized heavily as a central point of God’s dealing with man. Old Testament prophets wrote primarily of the Church, not of Israel. When the New Testament speaks of Israel, it seldom means the nation that is presently in the middle East; the Church is the new Israel. God has only one covenant people: the Church. Israelites can become part of the covenant people by accepting Jesus Christ. The covenants of God are the prime framework in which God deals with man.

Present View of Israel: Events in present-day Israel are irrelevant for the Church. Unbelievers in Israel and the rest of the world will be the subjects of God’s wrath in the Great Tribulation. Many Jews will accept Jesus during this time. CPs do not see the Bible as teaching that the

temple will be rebuilt. The Jewish sacrificial system will not be reinstated in the Millennium, as this would be considered an “abomination” in the covenantal view of the Bible. In fact, many CPs see the abomination of desolation as the continuation of the Jews to offer animal sacrifices after Jesus died on the cross. They see the last days as prefigured by the events of the first century A.D.

Imminence of the Second Coming of Jesus: Strictly speaking, CPs do not believe in the imminence of Jesus’ second coming. That is, they do not see the Bible as teaching that it can happen any time. They believe that the man of sin must first be revealed and the Great Tribulation must take place before Jesus returns. Many CPs expect the Church to be filled with God’s power and holiness before the second coming. They believe such events can happen very rapidly once they are set in motion.

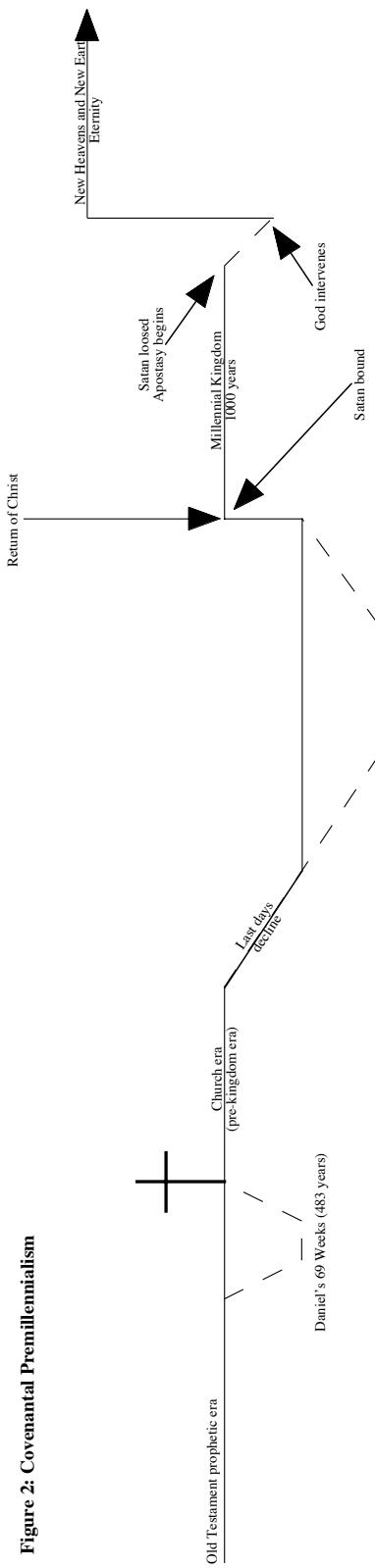
History: The view originated during the early second century with many of the Church Fathers (led by Justin, Tertullian, and Lactantius) embracing the view. By the fourth century Augustine’s views (which spawned postmillennialism and amillennialism) prevailed, and CP almost totally disappeared. It made a comeback in some movements starting from the time of the Reformation (Isaac Newton, Charles Wesley, and Henry Alford, for example), but did not become widely held again until the 1900’s. The view is espoused in the writings of Pat Robertson (though not consistently), George Eldon Ladd, James Robison, Walter Martin, Gundry, and others.

The Last Days: Most CPs believe that “last days” is just a term used in the New Testament to refer to all that time between the first and second comings of Jesus. It will be characterized by an intensification of human problems that leads to the righteous becoming more righteous, the evil becoming more evil, and a worldwide dictatorship, with Antichrist at the helm, which persecutes the Church.

How We Should Live: The world will get worse and worse before the second coming, but the Church should get stronger and stronger. Jesus said to watch, pray, and occupy until He comes. The most important activities in the minds of CPs are to preach the gospel and edify the Church. Many CPs see value in working on social problems through reformation of its institutions. Some believe that the Church can actually hold back the rising tide of evil through obedience and spiritual warfare, thus “buying” more time for people to come to know the Lord. CPs are generally in favor of political involvement and some activities that have long-term goals. While this may come across as inconsistent, they would defend their view by saying that no one knows how close we really are to the end, so we may as well work while we can. Although CPs view the Law as “having been fulfilled” by Jesus, many would see it as the standard for ethics. They would doubt the likelihood of success for any long-term efforts toward cultural reform through theonomy (basing the laws of the land on biblical laws) but paradoxically may engage in activities to that end anyway. I know of no CPs who have ever engaged in “date-setting.” Most CPs are confident, vibrant Christians who understand that they need to be strong in the face of adversity, which is bound to get worse.

Weaknesses: The lack of any details about activities during the Millennium and any statement of purpose for the Millennium undermine an otherwise biblically sound approach. In fact, the whole idea of a literal 1000-year period is problematic, since it is only mentioned in one verse – that

verse being in the most symbolic book of the Bible! There is a sort of vagueness which troubles DP critics about CP; the root of the criticism seems to stem from a sense that CPs do not interpret most eschatological passages as literally as do DPs. Yet, on the other hand they do not go far enough in carefully interpreting apocalyptic language the way amillennialists and postmillennialists do. Finally, the CP message comes across as negative to many hearers. “You are going to suffer; you might be killed.” Because of this, many CP pastors do not teach their view dogmatically (which DPs interpret as a lack of conviction). CPs would say, however, that they have so much confidence in their view that they do not fear its losing out in open discussion. Pastors may even invite speakers who hold other views to come and explain their view.



Definitions

The Millennium: The 1000 years mentioned in Revelation 20, during which Satan is bound, is called the Millennium. To amillennialists (amills) this period is symbolic of a relatively long, but indeterminate period of time. Some amills teach that it is the Church age while others believe it is symbolic of the intermediate state between a believer's death and the general resurrection. The binding of Satan took place when Jesus rose from the dead and is not absolute, contrary to the teaching of DPs and CPs. Instead it is limited to his deceiving power over the nations. Many passages relegated to the Millennium by DPs and CPs are interpreted as Heaven by amills.

Antichrist: Not all amills believe in a personal antichrist. Most say that a "man of sin" will arise in the last days who will ascend to great political and evil spiritual power, eventually becoming a world ruler. He will inflict persecution on the Church during the one and final eschatological conflict between good and evil, the battle of Armageddon that coincides with that period of apostasy at the end of the Church age. He and all his followers will be destroyed by the brightness of the second coming of Jesus.

Second Coming of Jesus: A visible event in which Jesus bodily returns to earth, ending the reign of Antichrist and history. According to amills, this event is the same as the rapture. However, the word rapture is not used very much by amills. Amills correctly point out, however, that when the New Testament mentions Jesus' "coming" it does not in general refer to the *second* coming.

The Kingdom: The Kingdom of God refers to the realm over which Jesus rules as King. It is presently manifested in Christ's universal rule, both of the Church and the world. One enters the Kingdom by receiving Christ as Lord. The absoluteness will be fully manifested in the literal presence of Jesus Christ and God the Father in the eternal state.

The New Heavens and the New Earth: The meaning of this phrase refers to the future eternal state of the righteous in Heaven (2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 21).

A summary of this view can be seen in Figure 3.

How Various Eschatological Passages are Explained

Daniel 2:37 – 45: The first three kingdoms mentioned were fulfilled before the time of Christ. The fourth, symbolized by the feet and toes, is the ancient Roman empire. The kingdom that will never be destroyed (verse 44) is the Church. Jesus is the King of the Kingdom, and He has all authority in Heaven and earth now.

Daniel 9:24 – 27 (The 70-Week Prophecy): This prophecy predicts 70 weeks of years (i.e., 490 years) to be fulfilled concerning Israel, starting from the "going forth of the commandment to restore and build Jerusalem" (about 456 B.C.). Messiah comes after 483 of these years (Jesus' baptism in 26 A.D.). The first half of the 70th week is the three-and-a-half-year period of Jesus' earthly ministry. During the second half of the 70th week the gospel is preached to the Jews, who reject it. According to the context of the prophecy, the sacrifice and oblation cease in the middle of the week, when Jesus dies on the cross. The judgments pronounced by the prophecy occur 40

years later giving individual Israelites time to turn to Christ. Those who did not were judged during the Jewish wars culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem (70 A.D.) Note that verse 27 refers to the Messiah (Christ).

Ezekiel 40 – 47 (Ezekiel’s Temple): The vision of Ezekiel is fulfilled in the eternal state. Jesus forms the foundation for the true temple, the Church, but the temple is not formed until we’re all in Heaven.

The Olivet Discourse and the Book of Revelation: Nearly all of the Olivet discourse (found in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21) was fulfilled in the years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., following Jesus’ teaching that all these judgments would fall on the generation that heard Him speak. The “end” was the end of the Jewish system and Old Covenant age. Most of Revelation was also fulfilled during the time of the early Church. Amills, along with postmillennialists, have strongly emphasized the need for careful interpretation of apocalyptic language. These passages must not be taken literally. The context, the audience, and the background of the terminology must be considered.

1 Corinthians 15:50f; 1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:11: These passages refer to the second coming of Jesus and the second resurrection of Revelation 20, a general resurrection in which all will be raised.

2 Thessalonians 2:1 – 12: These passages refer to the persecution of the last days. “He who restrains” is God preventing the Antichrist from emerging from the world until His perfect timing. The Antichrist is the man of sin, and, according to some amills, Jesus’ second coming cannot take place until he is revealed and becomes the ruler of the world.

2 Peter 3:1 – 13: These passages refer to the events of the time of the end, such as the apostasy and the bodily second coming of Jesus. This is immediately followed by the new heaven and new earth (verse 13), which is the eternal state of the righteous.

Revelation 20: The first resurrection is spiritual, occurring at one’s salvation. The second resurrection is the one general resurrection, which occurs at the end of history when all who have ever lived stand before God at the great White Throne Judgment.

Philosophical Issues

Prime Hermeneutical Principles: A genuine attempt is made to interpret apocalyptic language in light of other passages (interpreting Scripture with Scripture). This position is strongly covenantal and therefore opposed to the “wooden” literalism of the dispensational interpretative scheme. The Church is emphasized heavily as a central point of God’s dealing with man. Old Testament prophets wrote primarily of the Church, not of Israel. When the New Testament speaks of Israel, it seldom means the nation which is presently in the middle East; the Church is the new Israel. God has only one covenant people: the Church. Israelites can become part of the covenant people by accepting Jesus Christ. The covenants of God are the prime framework in which God deals with man. Obscure, difficult, and symbolic passages are interpreted in light of clear ones.

Present View of Israel: Events in present-day Israel are irrelevant for the Church. Many amills see the abomination of desolation as the continuation of the Jews to offer animal sacrifices after Jesus died on the cross. The prophecies of the Old Testament that DPs take literally are either already fulfilled (1 Kings 4:21; 2 Chronicles 9:26) or they are fulfilled in the Church (Jeremiah 31:33,34; Hebrews 10:16f; 12:22 - 24).

Inminence of the Second Coming of Jesus: Amills believe in the imminence of Jesus' second coming. That is, they believe that it can happen any time. Although some amills believe that the man of sin must first be revealed before Jesus can return, they believe such events can happen very rapidly once they are set in motion.

History: The view originated during the early fourth century as a version of Augustine's views (who is claimed by both amills and postmillennialists). Floyd Hamilton, Geerhardus Vos, Oswald Allis, Kuyper, Berkhof, William E. Cox, Wyngaarden, and Jay Adams espouse Amillennialism in their writings. Roman Catholics are amill as are many churches of the Reformed tradition, such as Lutheran and some Presbyterian. This view is sometimes difficult to distinguish in early writings from postmillennialism.

The Last Days: Most amills believe that "last days" is a term used in the New Testament to refer to all that time between the first and second comings of Jesus. There will be suffering throughout this time, but during this time there is an ever-increasing intensification of human problems that culminate in a time of apostasy in the Church when Satan is loosed. Some amills see this leading to a world-wide dictatorship with Antichrist at the helm.

How We Should Live: The world will inevitably get worse and worse before the second coming. Jesus said to watch, pray, and occupy until He comes. The most important activities in the minds of amills are the preaching of the gospel and edification of the Church, but most do not believe that the Church will be successful in evangelizing the world. Many amills see some value in attempts to reform society along biblical lines. They would doubt the likelihood of success for any long term efforts toward cultural reform through theonomy (making biblical laws the basis of the laws of the land), but paradoxically many engage in such activities anyway. Amills are not generally opposed to political involvement and they have engaged in some activities that have long-term goals. While this may come across as inconsistent, they would defend their view by saying that no one knows how close we really are to the end, so we may as well work while we can. Although amills view the Law as "having been fulfilled" by Jesus, many would see it as the standard for ethics. Only a few amills have engaged in "date setting," e.g. Harold Camping in 1994? Amills consider themselves in the Kingdom of God now, but they also claim to be "realists" rather than optimistic about the spread of the gospel. Churches that hold the amill view do not talk much about the details of eschatological events, but some of them emphasize that one day Jesus will come and all His people will be with Him forever.

Weaknesses: The amill interpretation of Revelation 20 has been a consistent problem for them. DPs, CPs, and postmillennialists criticize their tendency to interpret Revelation as a series of descriptions of the same events rather than chronologically. The way they interpret the resurrections of Revelation 20 has also been criticized. Amill interpretations of prophecy trouble

DP critics, the root of the criticism stemming from a sense that amills do not interpret the Bible as literally as do DPs (no one else does either). In fairness to amills, however, they attempt honest and careful interpretation of apocalyptic language. Some passages they relegate to Heaven do not fit (Isaiah 65) since death occurs. Finally, the amill message comes across as negative to many hearers, “there is no millennium” being the starting point.

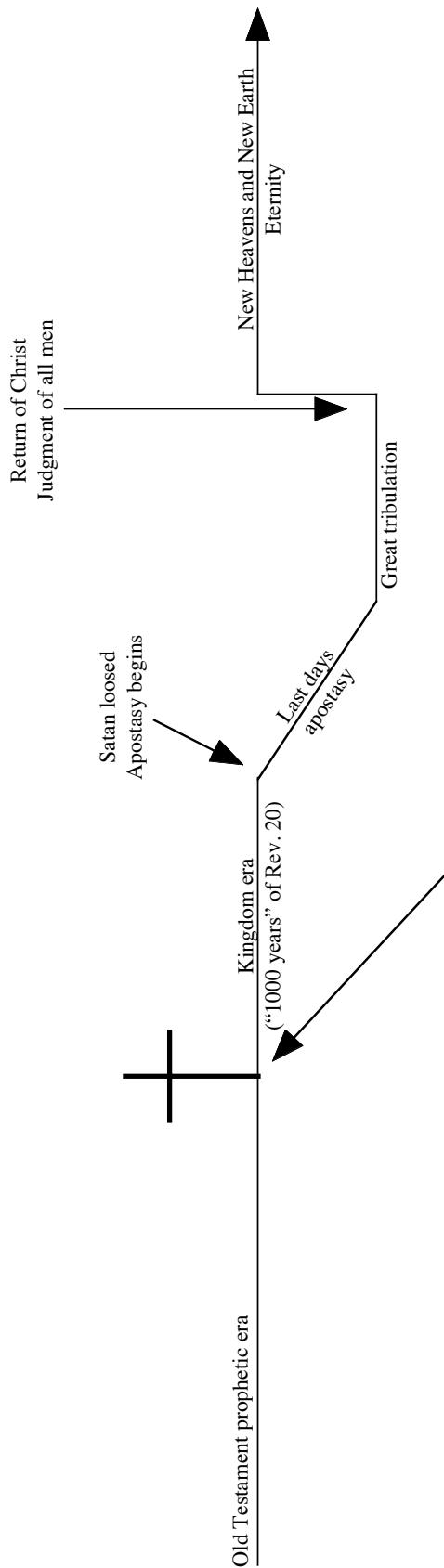


Figure 3: Amillennialism

Definitions

The Millennium: The 1000 years mentioned in Revelation 20, during which Satan is bound, is called the millennium. To postmillennialists (postmills) this period is symbolic of a relatively long, but indeterminate period of time. Some postmills teach that it represents the Church age while others believe it is a future “golden age” of the Church which will be inaugurated as the world becomes more and more Christianized. The binding of Satan is not absolute, contrary to the teaching of DPs and CPs. Instead it is limited to his deceiving power over the nations.

Antichrist: Most postmills say that the “man of sin” was Nero Caesar, who inflicted great harm on the Church and on Jews during the “last days” of the Old Covenant age, also called the “great tribulation.” He and all those in collusion with him were destroyed by the judgment-coming of Jesus in the years preceding the destruction of Jerusalem. Some postmills believe that there will be another “man of sin” at the end of the Church age in conjunction with the brief apostasy mentioned in Revelation 20.

Second Coming of Jesus: A visible event in which Jesus bodily returns to earth, ending the Church age and history. According to postmills this event is the same as the rapture. However, the word rapture is not used very much by postmills. Postmills correctly point out, however, that when the New Testament mentions Jesus’ “coming” it does not in general refer to the *second* coming.

The Kingdom: The Kingdom of God refers to the universal rule of Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. One enters the Kingdom by receiving Christ as Lord. The absoluteness will be more fully manifested as time goes on in the Church age, culminating in the literal presence of Jesus Christ and God the Father in the eternal state.

The New Heavens and the New Earth: The meaning of this phrase refers to the future eternal state of the righteous in Heaven (2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 21).

A summary of this view can be seen in Figure 3.

How Various Eschatological Passages are Explained

Daniel 2:37 – 45: The first three kingdoms mentioned were fulfilled before the time of Christ. The fourth, symbolized by the feet and toes, is the ancient Roman empire. The kingdom which will never be destroyed (verse 44) is the Church. Jesus is the King of the Kingdom, and He has all authority in Heaven and earth now.

Daniel 9:24 – 27 (The 70-Week Prophecy): This prophecy predicts 70 weeks of years (i.e., 490 years) to be fulfilled concerning Israel, starting from the “going forth of the commandment to restore and build Jerusalem” (about 456 B.C.). Messiah comes after 483 of these years (Jesus’ baptism in 26 A.D.). The first half of the 70th week is the three-and-a-half-year period of Jesus’ earthly ministry. During the second half of the 70th week the gospel is preached to the Jews, who reject it. In accordance with the context of the prophecy, the sacrifice and oblation cease in the middle of the week, when Jesus dies on the cross. The judgments pronounced by the prophecy

occur 40 years later gives individual Israelites time to turn to Christ. Those who did not were judged during the Jewish wars culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem (70 A.D.) Note that verse 27 refers to the Messiah (Christ).

Ezekiel 40 – 47 (Ezekiel’s Temple): The vision of Ezekiel is fulfilled in the Church. Jesus forms the foundation for the true temple, the Church, which is being built by the Lord over time.

The Olivet Discourse and the Book of Revelation: Virtually all of the Olivet discourse (found in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21) was fulfilled in the years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., in accordance with Jesus’ teaching that all these judgments would fall on the generation that heard Him speak. The “end” was the end of the Jewish system and Old Covenant age. Most of the book of Revelation was also fulfilled during the time of the early Church. Postmills, along with amills, have strongly emphasized the need for careful interpretation of apocalyptic language. These passages must not be taken literally. The context, the audience, and the background of the terminology must be taken into account.

1 Corinthians 15:50f; 1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:11: These passages refer to the second coming of Jesus.

2 Thessalonians 2:1 – 12: These passages refer to the persecution of the last days of the Old Covenant era. “He who restrains” is Claudius Caesar, who reigned when Paul wrote the epistle, who prevented the Antichrist (Nero) from doing any damage (the Greek word for “restrain” is a play on “Claudius”). The emperor’s desire was always to show himself to be a god. Titus fulfilled this around 70 A.D.

2 Peter 3:1 – 13: These passages refer to the events of the time of the end, such as the apostasy and the bodily second coming of Jesus. This is immediately followed by the new heaven and new earth (verse 13), which is the eternal state of the righteous. Postmills assert that “hastening” the day of the Lord in this context indicates the possibility of the Church being free to speed up the coming of the day through obedience and prayer that the things needed to happen prior to that time will be fulfilled.

Revelation 20: The first resurrection is spiritual, occurring at salvation. The second resurrection is the one general resurrection, which occurs at the end of history when all who have ever lived stand before God at the great White Throne Judgment.

Philosophical Issues

Prime Hermeneutical Principles: A genuine attempt is made to interpret apocalyptic language in light of other passages (interpreting Scripture with Scripture). This position is strongly covenantal and hence opposed to the “wooden” literalism of the dispensational interpretative scheme. The Church is emphasized heavily as a central point of God’s dealing with man. Old Testament prophets wrote primarily of the Church, not of Israel. When the New Testament speaks of Israel, it seldom means the nation which is presently in the middle East; the Church is the new Israel. God has only one covenant people: the Church. Israelites can become part of the covenant people by accepting Jesus Christ. The covenants of God are the prime framework in

which God deals with man. Obscure, difficult, and symbolic passages are interpreted in light of clear ones.

Present View of Israel: Postmills anticipate the conversion of the nation of Israel, based on Romans 9 – 11. Postmills see the abomination of desolation as the continuation of the Jews to offer animal sacrifices after Jesus died on the cross. The prophecies of the Old Testament which DPs take literally are either already fulfilled (1 Kings 4:21; 2 Chronicles 9:26) or they are fulfilled in the Church (Jeremiah 31:33,34; Hebrews 10:16f; 12:22 – 24). Verses that DPs apply to Israel in the Millennium are fulfilled by the Church during its “golden age.”

Imminence of the Second Coming of Jesus: Postmills expect the vast majority of humanity to be saved before the second coming of Jesus. There will be a “golden age” of peace and prosperity because of the blessing of the Lord. Jesus will return after this and a brief rebellion at the end during which Satan is loosed.

History: The view originated during the early fourth century as a version of Augustine’s views (who is claimed by both amills and postmills). The view is espoused in the writings of Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Boettner, Kik, B.B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen, Gary DeMar, Gary North, Greg Bahnsen, Ken Gentry. Some of the more conservative Presbyterians are postmill as are many churches of the Reformed tradition. “Reconstructionists” are theonomic postmills, which means they emphasize Christian responsibility and the place of the Law of God in society. The postmill view is sometimes difficult to distinguish in early writings from the amill view. The distinguishing factors are the optimism of postmills, the way Kingdom passages such as Isaiah 65 are interpreted, and the chronological interpretation of Revelation 19 – 21.

The Last Days: Most postmills believe that “last days” can be, according to context, the last days of the Old Covenant era or all that time between the first and second comings of Jesus. There will be suffering throughout this time, but during this time there is an ever increasing outpouring of the Holy Spirit leading to a larger and larger percentage of believers in the world and spreading of Christian influence.

How We Should Live: The world will inevitably become more and more Christianized prior to the second coming. Jesus said to watch, pray, and occupy until He comes. The most important activities in the minds of postmills are the preaching of the gospel and edification of the Church, and discipling the nations through theonomy (institution of biblical laws). They believe that the Church will be successful in evangelizing the world. Postmills are strongly in favor of political involvement, although they stress that politics cannot save anyone. They have historically purposefully and successfully engaged in activities which have longterm goals. Many postmills would see the Law as the standard for civil law and ethics (theonomy). Postmills are strict biblicists who view the Bible as the standard for all ethics and morality as well as the basis for how one should live in every area of life. They have faith in the ultimate success for longterm efforts toward cultural reform through theonomy. The only date-setting I know of among postmills was an isolated (misguided) prediction of when the Millennium was coming in the early 1900s (recall that this precedes the second coming of Christ). Postmills consider themselves in the Kingdom of God now, and they expect the Kingdom to continue to expand until it fills the earth with the Glory of the Lord. They emphasize that Jesus will never have any

more authority than He has now (Matthew 28:19-20). Churches which hold the postmill view talk a great deal about revival and world-wide outpourings of the Holy Spirit. They emphasize the “Church triumphant.” They tend to be very critical of the pessimism of the other views (pessimillennialism versus their optimillennialism), but they have less antagonism for amill teachings than they do for premillennialism of any kind. They believe that although dispensationalism is not heresy, with its “any minute rapture” mentality, unscriptural view of Israel, and “wooden” literalism, it is still one of the most damaging teachings to ever hit the Church.

Weaknesses: The postmill optimism is seen by critics as being unrealistic. Many who think the world is getting worse and worse have harshly criticized and derided postmills. Such criticism, however, lacks historical perspective. Postmill interpretations of prophecy trouble DP and CP critics, the root of the criticism stemming from a sense that they do not interpret the Bible as literally as they should. DPs think that postmill interpretations are not “the plain meaning” of the texts. In fairness to postmills, however, they attempt honest and careful interpretation of apocalyptic language. Although the postmillennial view was the dominant view throughout most of Church history, it became relatively rare during the 1920s. That trend seems to be reversing, however, as more and more Christians seek a comprehensive framework for all of life, including political and social action.

A personal note: Recognizing the compelling arguments in favor of theonomic postmillennialism (see Ken Gentry’s book *He Shall Have Dominion*), I have come to realize what an important part of history we are living in today. What a mighty God we serve! When we truly understand how mighty He is, then it’s not so difficult to believe that His message will subdue all opposition. Yes, there are bumps in the road. Indeed, what we are seeing today is the judgment of God upon our Enlightenment age, which is turning out to be a short (albeit about 200 years) parenthesis of rebellion King Jesus has allowed to be inserted into the ongoing progress of His Kingdom development. What we are witnessing today is nothing less than the crumbling of humanism in the face of the next worldwide wave of Christian Kingdom building. What we may be about to observe in the 21st Century is a completion of the first Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries led by Luther and Calvin. Eventually, I believe, we are going to see the world move toward the building of Christendom, national entities built upon the Law of God as found in the Scriptures. We have before us the awesome tasks of applying the Bible to every sphere of life in the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us be about the Lord’s business!

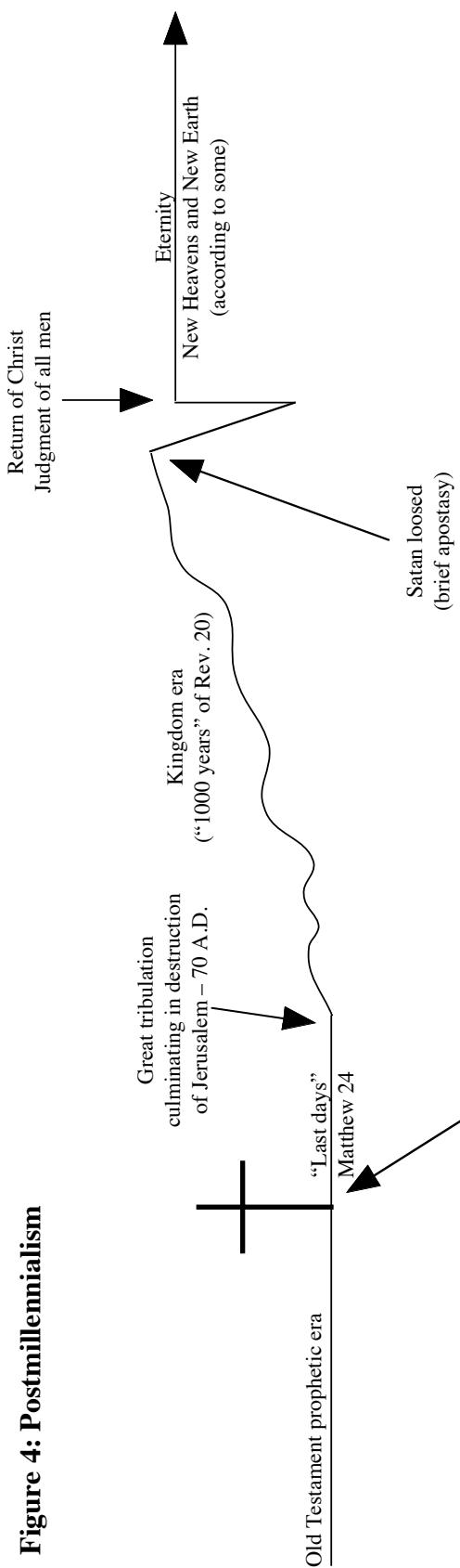


Figure 4: Postmillennialism

Daniel 2:37 – 45

Points of Agreement: The head of gold represents Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire. The shoulders and chest of silver represent the Medo-Persian empire. The torso and thighs of bronze represent the Grecian empire under Alexander the Great. All positions agree that these first three kingdoms mentioned were fulfilled before the time of Christ.

Dispensationalists: The fourth kingdom starts with the ancient Roman Empire. After an indeterminate period of time (a gap), the Roman Empire is resurrected. This is tantamount to stretching the fourth kingdom until the time of the end of history. (Other views would argue that this is eisegesis.) Dispensationalists argue, however, that a resurrected Roman empire at the end of history is needed so that the kingdom that will never be destroyed (verse 44) is the millennium. The gap is necessary because the Old Testament prophets knew *nothing* of the Church.

Covenantalists: Continuity seems to demand that the fourth kingdom, symbolized by the legs, feet, and toes, is the ancient Roman empire which was destroyed by the preaching of the gospel. The Church is the kingdom which can never be destroyed. Covenantalists assert that Jesus is the King of the Kingdom now and that He has all authority in Heaven and earth now (Matthew 28:18-20). To most covenantal theologians, this passage is fulfilled (preterist).

Daniel 7

Points of Agreement: This prophecy is parallel to that of Daniel 2. The four beasts represent the same four kingdoms as the parts of the image did in Daniel 2. Again, the disagreement centers on the timing of the events which establish the kingdom.

Dispensationalists (and some others): This language demands a yet to be fulfilled event in which the fourth beast evolves into a resurrected Roman empire at the end of history. They cite verse 11 to insist that the beast has not yet been cast into the “burning flame,” which seems to require a futuristic interpretation for the fourth beast.

Covenantalists: These passages are seen to relate to the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds back to Heaven (the ascension) and receiving the kingdom. Again, this kingdom which shall never be destroyed is the Church. The coming in the clouds also alludes to the “judgment-coming” of Jesus upon the generation of unbelieving Jews to whom He spoke in Matthew 23 when He said, “All these things shall come upon this generation.” Verses 23 – 27 refer to the Roman persecution of the early Church and how the empire eventually disintegrated because of the preaching of the gospel.

Daniel 9

Points of Agreement: This prophecy predicts 70 weeks of years (i.e., 490 years) to be fulfilled concerning national Israel, starting from the “going forth of the commandment to restore and build Jerusalem” (about 456 B.C.). Messiah comes at the end of 69 weeks of years (483 years to

Jesus' baptism about 28 A.D.). Different numbers are found in different commentaries because of uncertainty about the calendar system B.C.

Futurist: Dispensationalists see a gap (for the Church) between the 69th and the 70th weeks so that the 70th week is a wholly future event during which Antichrist "makes a covenant with many" Jews. He breaks this covenant, eventually forbidding animal sacrifices and desecrating the temple. Thus, this view requires a rebuilt temple prior to or during the 70th week. The desecration is the "abomination of desolation" which leads to the great tribulation period during the last half of the 70th week of years. Note that verse 27 refers to the Antichrist.

Preterist/Futurist: Many covenantalists see the first half of the 70th week pointing to Jesus' earthly ministry. The cutting off of the Messiah refers to Jesus' death on the cross, which puts an end to animal sacrifices once and for all. Then, a gap occurs between the first and last halves of the 70th week. This gap is the "times of the Gentiles" and thus does not pertain to the Jews. Since the prophecy is about national Israel, they along with the rest of the unbelieving world are judged during the last half of the 70th week, known as the great tribulation. Note that verse 27 refers to the Messiah (Christ).

Gapped Preterist View: Other covenantalists see the first half of the 70th week as the three-and-a-half-year period of Jesus' earthly ministry. In accordance with the context of the prophecy, the sacrifice and oblation cease in the middle of the week, when Jesus dies on the cross. Then there is a gap of 40 years (one generation) which gives individual Israelites time to turn to Christ. Then, the last half of the 70th week consists of the judgments during the Jewish wars culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem (70 A.D.) Note that verse 27 refers to the Messiah (Christ).

Continuous Preterist View: Still other covenantalists see the first half of the 70th week as the three-and-a-half-year period of Jesus' earthly ministry. During the second half of the 70th week the gospel is preached to the Jews, who reject it. In accordance with the context of the prophecy, the sacrifice and oblation cease in the middle of the week, when Jesus dies on the cross. The judgments pronounced by the prophecy occur 40 years later which gives individual Israelites time to turn to Christ. Those who did not do so were judged during the Jewish wars culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem (70 A.D.) Note that verse 27 refers to the Messiah (Christ).

An Alternative View of 2 Peter 3:10

From the text above it could be inferred that all scholars agree that 2 Peter 3:10 refers to the end of history. To avoid giving that impression, I should point out that there is a preterist view of 2 Peter 3:10 which is held by some orthodox Christians (for example, Raymond P. Joseph, RPCNA pastor from Detroit whose notes I've used here with his permission).

“But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up” (2 Peter 3:10). It very well could be that Peter is using here the same hermeneutic that he used in Acts 2 when quoting Joel 2:30-32: “And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: Blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the remnant whom the LORD calls” (Joel 2:30-32). It could be that the Apostle Peter is not describing the end of the physical world, a world scorched and cleansed by a physical searing and cleansing fire, as many think. Instead, Peter could be describing the final destruction, the conclusive end of the Old Covenant Age, which was about to take place with the covenantally cataclysmic event known to history as the Destruction of Jerusalem, when the Roman armies surrounded the “Holy City” and finally destroyed both the city and the Temple, with great loss of Jewish life. The Christians, having been warned by Christ, escaped to “Pella” and were spared.

Why should one believe that the Apostle Peter, in his second epistle, third chapter, was speaking in metaphorical, figurative terms? Peter could have followed the same method of interpretation, which he followed when he preached his famous sermon at Pentecost. “But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, ‘Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel...’” (Acts 2:14-16). Peter goes on to quote Joel 2:28-32, and apply it to what was happening right then and there. What was happening? The Holy Spirit was being poured out upon the Church at Pentecost. The graphic language used by the prophet Joel, which we would think surely must be referring to some cataclysmic holocaust of immense, even cosmic proportions, Peter is applying to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

When we come to 2 Peter 3:10, the language is gripping; the language is cosmic; the language conjures up visions of a fiery worldwide cataclysm. But is that what Peter had in mind? Was Peter writing about a natural and physical worldwide holocaust of burning fire? Was he describing a cosmic event? Perhaps he was writing about the sun flaring up in some mysterious manner? Perhaps even a worldwide atomic conflagration, or some other all-consuming fire of God falling upon the earth to burn it up, to cleanse it, and prepare it for the future Kingdom (which is what many commentators will tell you)? Perhaps so, but it certainly could be that Peter was writing in the same vein in which the Holy Spirit of God had led him to interpret the prophet Joel when he preached his famous sermon at Pentecost in Acts 2. Peter was writing in the same mode of speaking as Joel was so many centuries before. The Holy Spirit gave Peter his hermeneutic (method of interpretation) when Peter quoted Joel. And it was the same Holy Spirit

Who gave Peter the same method of speaking using such graphic cosmic language to describe what was primarily a spiritual event: the destroying of the last remnants of the Old Covenant Age, the City and Temple in Jerusalem.

In other words, Peter did not switch hermeneutic horses in the middle of the stream of revelation. Peter had listened well when the Holy Spirit interpreted the prophet Joel to him. He preached to the Church at Pentecost that the coming of the Spirit was what they were seeing, and it was that which Joel was writing about when he used such a graphic and dramatic genre of language. And perhaps Peter used that same genre when writing his epistle. Thus, rather than speaking of some cosmic physical fire, he was warning the Christians that what they were about to witness in their generation was the destruction of the Holy City of Jerusalem, a destruction so thorough and so bloody that it could only be described in that same kind of graphic language. This was a physical event, an event so bloody that the historian Josephus (hired by the Roman government as their official historian) describes it in vivid “full color” language (Cf. Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews*). But much more than that, the Destruction of Jerusalem had a spiritual significance far more important than the physical impact. The physical aspect of it was swallowed up in the spiritual meaning. We can be comfortable with this knowledge because history from God’s perspective is summed up in two sections or parts: 1) B.C., before Christ, and, 2) A.D., after Christ’s first coming: The Old and the New; The Old Testament (Covenant) and the New; The Old Covenant Age and the New Covenant Age. From God’s perspective, that is the ultimately definitive, conclusive, and the only meaningful paradigm of history. And we would do well to emulate God and His viewpoint, if we wish to have His perspective on history, uncontaminated by our own limited ideas. The Holy Spirit used cataclysmic language to describe the significant events surrounding those two parts of history.