

Through the Bible – Ezekiel

The Millennium

Introduction

The book of Ezekiel can be overwhelming. From the opening vision of the glory of God to the dry bones in the valley, Ezekiel's prophecy is intense. Its message is just as extreme. Ezekiel prophesies the worst destruction for the people of Judah, but also gives hope to the exiles through promises of a restored Israel. He soothes the people as he talks about their return to the land, the restoration of their sovereignty, abundant blessings and a rebuilt Temple. While some of these prophecies were fulfilled in part, many remain to be realized. The biblical writers understood that, while the Exile ended, Israel has never experienced all that Ezekiel and the other prophets promised. Since God keeps His promises, students of the Word look forward to the fulfillment of these prophecies during the earthly reign of the Messiah; a Kingdom that will last for 1,000 years

The Thousand-Year Kingdom

The foundation of the doctrine of the Millennium lies in the unfulfilled promises of God. For example, the promise to David that he would always have a son to sit on the throne, the boundaries of the Promised Land that God set for Israel or the spread of the worship of the Lord throughout the world. Promises like these were either not fully experienced or not seen at all. In fact, it is a repeated theme in the Old Testament that the Israelites never lived up to all that God had planned for them.

The Old Testament rests the hope of these promises in the figure of the coming Messiah. It would be He who would deliver the people from their sins, establish the Kingdom of Israel and so forth. And in the New Testament, Jesus Christ comes to fill that role. Yet, while constantly pressed to accomplish all of these things, Jesus focused on the work of salvation and then ascended to Heaven, giving the Church the work of spreading the Good News. New Testament prophecy in the Gospels, the Epistles and especially the book of Revelation, looks forward to the day when Christ will return and establish a 1,000-year Kingdom to fulfill all of these prophecies.

The number, 1,000, comes from the book of Revelation chapter 20. Christ returns to earth, then Satan is bound and the dead in Christ are resurrected. Six times in this chapter, the reign of Christ is said to last for 1,000 years, a millennium. As the culmination of the last book of prophecy, this is the fulfillment that the book of Ezekiel has been waiting for.

Views on the Millennium

As with any issue of eschatology, there are many different views of how to understand the Millennium. These views are distinguished primarily by their method of

biblical interpretation and how they understand the nation of Israel in Scripture. There are three primary interpretations, referred to by how they understand the return of the Lord in relation to the Millennium.

One view is called Postmillennialism. This view believes that the Church will advance throughout the whole world until the last days. Postmillennialists believe that it is their responsibility to bring about the Kingdom of God on the earth. To them, the Millennium, as described in Revelation, may or may not be a literal time period. It represents a last Golden Age of Christianity when the Church has victory in the world.

The most popular view is called Amillennialism. This view believes that the Millennium in Revelation is not descriptive of a literal event or time period. They believe that the world will continue in persistent struggle between good and evil until Christ returns. An Amillennialist believes that the promises in Scripture that remain unfulfilled are either fulfilled spiritually in the Church or that they are not to be taken literally. Typically, Amillennialism does not see an important place for the nation of Israel in their theology.

The third view is Premillennialism. This could also be called the literal view. Premillennialists believe that Christ will return to the earth and establish a literal, 1,000 year Kingdom on the earth from Jerusalem. This is when all of the promises God made to Israel will be fulfilled. Premillennialists place a high value on the nation of Israel in their theology and strive to interpret the Bible as written without spiritualization or unnecessary allegory.

Conclusion

As said before, the most important issue in this debate is how one interprets the Bible. Post- and Amillennialists rely upon some form of allegory or spiritualization, Premillennialists take the Bible as written. Early on in Church history, men like Papias advocated a literal reading of Revelation, but by Augustine, this view had been abandoned in favor of Neo-Platonic exegesis. Despite its popularity, spiritualization of biblical prophecy is arbitrary and inconsistent. We ought to strive to let the Bible speak for itself. When it says 1,000 years, we should accept that as the truth.

Closely tied is the issue of the nation of Israel. Is God finished with His chosen people? Post- and Amillennialists tend to be replacement theologians, seeing the Church as the replacement of Israel. However, if we are to take the Bible as written, then we must believe that God will never break His everlasting Covenant with Israel, and look for the day when they will be restored and exalted. Again, if the Bible says Israel, we should say Israel.

Premillennialism is the most natural reading of the Scriptures and gives us great hope for the restoration of the world. All of God's promises in the book of Ezekiel and everywhere else will come true, and God will never abandon His people.