

(Rev. 22:5). Eschatology focuses particularly on “the end or culmination” and what events will occur around it.

Eschatological Models

Differing views of eschatology often result from contrasting assumptions regarding God’s purposes. Prior beliefs about how God works can influence how one approaches prophetic texts and the Bible’s storyline. Wrong assumptions distort what God has revealed. The Christian must make sure his understanding of God’s purposes stems from the Bible and not from other worldviews or philosophies.

There are two models or approaches for viewing God’s purposes—the spiritual vision model and the new creation model.¹ These models function as overall approaches for viewing God’s purposes.

SPIRITUAL VISION MODEL

The spiritual vision model elevates “spiritual” realities over physical matters. In this view, a stark dualism exists between the spiritual and the material with the spiritual valued more than the physical. Material realities are perceived as bad, inferior, or evil. The spiritual vision model adopts the worldview of the Greek philosopher Plato (ca. 428–348 BC) and the philosophies stemming from his views. Plato taught the superiority of the spiritual over the material. Religious variations of Platonism often present the soul’s escape from the body to a purely spiritual existence as the highest ideal and goal. Gnosticism, which was a major threat to the early church, was one form of Platonism. Gnosticism disparaged the goodness of the material world.

While most early Christians were neither Platonists nor Gnostics, Plato’s ideas often infiltrated the early church. Origen (ca. AD 184–ca. 254) came close to denying bodily resurrection. The influential theologian Augustine (AD 354–430) believed that the idea of an earthly kingdom of Jesus was carnal and opted for the view that the kingdom of God is a spiritual entity, the church. His spiritual view of God’s kingdom, as explained in his work *The City of God*, came to be known as *amillennialism*. These two influential theologians downplayed the physical aspects of Bible prophecy and elevated the spiritual. The Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages, which embraced Augustine’s amillennial perspective, also operated according to overspiritualized assumptions about God’s kingdom.

The unbiblical mixture of Plato’s ideas with Christianity has been called “Christoplatonism.”² Such an approach to God’s purposes can be seen in statements like “God is interested in saving the soul, not the body,” or “God’s kingdom is spiritual, not physical,” or “A Christian’s eternal destiny is heaven, not earth.” Spiritual-vision-model thinking can also be spotted in beliefs that physical, land, and national promises to Israel in the Old Testament must be fulfilled spiritually in the church or be absorbed into the person of Christ. It is evident when people think

1. For more on the concepts of the spiritual vision model and the new creation model, see Craig A. Blaising, “Premillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 160–81.

2. Randy C. Alcorn, *Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2004), 475.

their eternal destiny is a bodiless existence in the sky or sitting on a cloud all day with nothing to do. To use a cultural example, Gary Larson's famous cartoon strip *The Far Side* once showed a man in heaven on a cloud with wings on his back and a halo on his head. Obviously bored out of his mind, the man said to himself, "Wish I'd brought a magazine." The message—the future in heaven is terminally boring.

For much of church history the church adopted spiritualized views of the future. Existence in heaven was regarded as an escape from the carnal physical world. Even today many think that man's final destiny will be a static spiritual existence in the sky apart from any physicality. But there is a better way—the biblical way.

NEW CREATION MODEL

The new creation model, on the other hand, affirms the goodness of all of God's creation, including its material elements. Paul declared, "For by him [Jesus] all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible" (Col. 1:16). The creation is composed of both spiritual and material realities, and both matter to God. Both were negatively affected by sin and the fall of man, and both will eventually be restored by God. Peter spoke of the coming "restoration of all things" in Acts 3:21 (NASB). A new creation approach does not deny the importance of spiritual truths and realities; it affirms them. But it opposes efforts to spiritualize physical realities or treat them as inferior. Spiritual and physical blessings come together.

Passages like Isaiah 11; 25; 65; 66; Romans 8; and Revelation 21 affirm that God's future plans involve material realities. They speak of a regenerated earth and tangible matters such as nations, kings, economics, agriculture, the animal kingdom, and sociopolitical issues. These matters are not erased with Christ's kingdom but restored. When discussing the glories of the coming new earth, God declares, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5). Negative consequences that resulted because of sin such as death, decay, and the curse will be removed, but the basics of the creation environment will be redeemed. The final destiny of God's people is not an ethereal spiritual presence in the sky but a tangible existence on a new earth.

The new creation model also affirms the continuing importance of both individuals and national entities. God pursues the salvation of individual human beings, and he also judges and blesses nations as national entities. The nation of Israel is the clearest example (Matt. 19:28; Acts 1:6). Also, the table of nations in Genesis 10–11 shows that God is sovereign over and concerned for all people groups. The Abrahamic covenant reveals that God's purposes extend to involve blessing all nations (Gen. 12:3; 22:18).

The Bible also teaches that God will use Israel as a means of blessing the nations (Gen. 12:2–3). Israel was the vessel through whom Jesus the Messiah came and is the center of the Messiah's kingdom, in which Israel will lead in both service and function (Isa. 2:2–4; Acts 3:25; Rom. 11:11–12, 15). Isaiah 19:16–25 tells of the day when Egypt and Assyria will become the people of God alongside Israel, who is also God's people. Nations with their kings even exist on the new earth (Rev. 21:24, 26).

Thus, God's plans involve nations, including Israel. Jesus brings harmony among Jews and Gentiles, but he does not erase ethnicities (Eph. 2:11–22; 3:6). One should thus avoid “nation bias” in determining which prophetic references to Israel or other nations should be spiritualized for this church age.

The new creation model also connects eschatology and protology. *Eschatology* is about “last things” while *protology* concerns “first things.” If one grasps God's original purposes for man and the creation, then one is in a better position to grasp what is still to come. God created a tangible world in six days and then deemed it “very good” (Gen. 1:31). The goodness of all parts of God's creation refutes Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism that view the physical world as illusion (*maya*) and as something that must be overcome for enlightenment. This thinking also counters all forms of Platonism and their negative views of the material realm. While the universe consists of material and immaterial realities (Col. 1:16), there is no essential dualism in which spirit is viewed as inherently superior to the physical. Man himself is a complex unity of body and soul, material and immaterial. God made man as a physical entity to live on a physical earth. Thus, God's purposes include the physical realm.

That God's kingdom purposes are related to this earth is seen in the commands given to Adam in Genesis 1:26–28, where Adam is told to “have dominion over,” “subdue,” and “fill” the earth. God created the world and then designated man as a mediator to rule over it for God's glory. Adam failed this command and did not fulfill God's intent for mankind. Man was subject to death, and the ground was cursed and subjected to futility (Gen. 3:17–19; Rom. 8:20). Today, humanity is characterized by sin, and the creation works against man. But God's plan is to restore and regenerate this earth (Matt. 19:28; Acts 3:21).

Eschatology and Bible Interpretation

Using correct interpretative principles is critical for understanding Bible prophecy and eschatology. This involves a consistent use of grammatical-historical interpretation to all areas of the Bible, including its prophetic sections. This approach seeks to understand the original meaning of the Bible writers and what the original readers would have understood. It views Bible texts as having a single meaning, not multiple, hidden, or allegorical meanings. Fortunately, most Bible-believing Christians use grammatical-historical interpretation for most passages of Scripture. But unfortunately, there is a long history of unwarranted abandonment of grammatical-historical interpretation when it comes to eschatological sections. A spiritual approach to prophecy has often led to beliefs that the church is the new Israel or that land promises in the Old Testament are only about spiritual blessings for the church.

For example, Isaiah 2:2–4 speaks of a coming era when people from the nations will make their way to the city of Jerusalem to learn about God. During this time there will be no war, only peace, as the Lord reigns over the earth. This era of international harmony among nations has not yet occurred, but some spiritualize this passage,

viewing it as being fulfilled in this age when people from different countries believe the gospel and join the church. But the church is not in view in this passage. To use another example, Revelation 7:4–8 speaks of 144,000 Jewish people, consisting of twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. This group is contrasted with a large group of saved Gentiles “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” The group in Revelation 7:4–8 is clearly Jewish, but some take this as describing the church, not Israel. This approach does not fit with grammatical-historical hermeneutics since there are no contextual reasons to take this passage as referring to anything other than representatives of ethnic Israel.

Abandoning grammatical-historical interpretation also leads to discarding what the Bible says about the coming millennial kingdom of Jesus. Even those who deny a future earthly kingdom of Jesus admit that a literal approach to Old Testament prophecy must lead to a coming, literal, earthly kingdom. For instance, O. T. Allis conceded that “the Old Testament prophecies if literally interpreted cannot be regarded as having been fulfilled or as being capable of fulfillment in this age.”³ And Floyd E. Hamilton acknowledged, “Now we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures.”⁴

The grammatical-historical approach to interpretation fits with normal means of communication. It also has support from the fact that many prophecies concerning Jesus’s first coming were fulfilled in a normal, literal sense. Jesus came from a virgin (Isa. 7:14), was born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2), and died an awful death on behalf of his people (Isaiah 53). If prophecies of Jesus’s first coming were fulfilled literally, so too will prophecies concerning his second coming.

Eschatology and Jesus Christ

Jesus is the center of God’s kingdom program. He is the ultimate King. Both the King (Jesus) and the realm of his kingdom are the subject of many Old Testament prophecies. The first verse of the New Testament declares, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). Not only is Jesus the rightful descendant of David and Abraham, but he is also qualified to fulfill the Davidic and Abrahamic covenants. All the prophecies and covenants of the Bible find their fulfillment in Jesus. So Paul declared, “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor. 1:20).

Yet Christians are often confused about Jesus’s role in fulfilling Old Testament promises. Some believe that promises concerning Israel and Israel’s land in the Old Testament are fulfilled or absorbed into Jesus in such a way that one should not expect a future literal fulfillment of these matters. Allegedly, since Jesus is the ultimate or true Israelite who replaced Israel, no theological significance exists for the nation

3. O. T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church: An Examination of the Claim of Dispensationalists That the Christian Church Is a Mystery Parenthesis Which Interrupts the Fulfillment to Israel of the Kingdom Prophecies of the Old Testament* (1945; repr., Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 238.

4. Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of the Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1942), 38.

declared that the Messiah “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11). Since the ministry of the Holy Spirit was closely linked with the new covenant, John declared that Jesus was the One who would bring the new covenant to believers. At the Last Supper Jesus explicitly linked his death with the new covenant: “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). Paul mentioned this event in 1 Corinthians 11:25: “In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’” Jesus ratified the new covenant with his sacrificial death and his identity as the suffering servant of the Lord (Isa. 53:3–6).

The new covenant is in effect in this church age. Those who trust in Jesus the Messiah are indwelt with the Holy Spirit and participate in the full promises of the new covenant. Those who proclaim the gospel in this age are presenting the new covenant. Paul said that God “has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:6). Quoting the new covenant passage of Jeremiah 31:31–34 in Hebrews 8:8–12, the writer of Hebrews explains that the new covenant is superior to the old covenant, which is becoming “obsolete” (Heb. 8:13). Hebrews 9:15 and 12:24 both affirm that Jesus is “the mediator of a new covenant.” Yet while spiritual blessings of the new covenant are in effect for the church, national and physical promises of the new covenant regarding Israel still need to be fulfilled. The Lord thus declared, “Behold, the days are coming” (Jer. 31:27, 31, 38) when Israel will receive the salvation promised in the new covenant. This will occur when Jesus returns.

Timing of Bible Prophecy Fulfillment

A study of eschatology involves understanding when various prophecies are fulfilled. Some were fulfilled in Old Testament times, others were fulfilled with the first coming of Jesus, and others await fulfillment at Jesus’s second coming. But when it comes to major prophetic sections such as Daniel 9:24–27; Matthew 24–25; Luke 21; 2 Thessalonians 2; and Revelation 6–20, there is disagreement among Christian theologians. Some hold to past fulfillment of these passages, some to present fulfillment, and others to future fulfillment. Also, some assert that timing is not even an issue in these passages. The four views concerning the timing of key prophetic sections are preterism, historicism, idealism, and futurism. The position affirmed here is futurism, but it is helpful to summarize all four views.

PRETERISM

The word *preterism* is based on the Latin term *preter*, which means “past.” Preterism asserts that most or all eschatological passages describing a tribulation and the return of Jesus were fulfilled with first-century events surrounding the AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem.¹⁹

The preterist understanding relies heavily on timing indicators in the New Tes-

19. For more on preterism, consult Richard L. Mayhue, “Jesus: A Preterist or Futurist?,” *MSJ* 14, no. 1 (2003): 9–22.

tament such as “near,” “soon,” “quickly,” and “this generation.” Much emphasis is given to Jesus’s words in Matthew 24:34: “This generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” Preterists understand “this generation” to refer to those alive at the time of Jesus’s words. Thus, most or all of the events described in Matthew 24 needed to happen in the first century, and the same is true of other statements identifying Jesus’s coming as “near” or appearing “quickly” (James 5:8; Rev. 1:1, 3; 2:16; 22:10, 20). The preterist view holds that the tribulation period occurred during the siege of Jerusalem in the late 60s and that Jesus came in the form of the Roman armies in AD 70 to destroy Jerusalem and the temple and bring an end to the Jewish age.

Two main forms of preterism exist. First, full or consistent preterism asserts that all Bible prophecy concerning Jesus’s second coming was fulfilled with the events surrounding AD 70. This includes the second coming of Jesus, the resurrection, and the eternal state. Thus, we should expect no future coming of Jesus because Jesus already came in AD 70. We are currently, therefore, in the new heaven and new earth of Revelation 21–22. Second, partial or moderate preterism affirms that much of the Olivet Discourse and Revelation were fulfilled in events surrounding the AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem but that a few passages such as Acts 1:9–11; 1 Corinthians 15:51–53; and 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 teach a future bodily return of Jesus Christ. Some partial preterists assert that a major part of the Olivet Discourse, Matthew 25:32–46, which describes the judgment of the nations, awaits future fulfillment.

Preterism has features that disqualify it from being true. First, it is tied to an unlikely date for the writing of Revelation. Since preterists believe that Revelation is predictive prophecy concerning events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the book of Revelation absolutely had to be written before AD 67. But the consensus view from church history is that Revelation was written in the reign of Domitian around AD 95. For instance, Irenaeus wrote (ca. AD 180) that Revelation was penned near the end of Domitian’s reign. If Revelation were written after AD 67, which is highly likely, all forms of preterism collapse.

Second, the preterist understanding of timing indicators such as “this generation,” “near,” and “quickly” is questionable. These do not demand that Jesus had to return in a few years or decades. On two occasions, Jesus stated that only the Father knew when prophetic events would be fulfilled. Jesus said, “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Matt. 24:36). Also, when asked about the timing of the restoration of national Israel, Jesus stated, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:7).

When Jesus declared that “this generation will not pass away until all these things take place,” he was not saying that the prophetic events of Matthew 24–25 had to occur within a few years or decades. He was projecting into the future within a prophetic context. The generation of people living when the future eschatological events of Matthew 24 began to occur, whenever that would take place, would be the ones to

witness the second coming of Jesus to earth. When this will happen is unknown, but when the events of Matthew 24 unfold, the return of Jesus will occur soon thereafter.

Also, the terms “near” and “soon” do not mean “in a few years” but rather convey the idea of imminence. Since no one but God knows when the tribulation period will occur, every generation should live with the imminent expectation that these events could break forth at any moment. Imminence does not demand that events must happen within a short period of time but cautions that they could occur at any time. That is why these warnings of the nearness of Jesus’s coming can apply to any group of Christians in history—first century, twenty-first century, or any century.

Third, the events predicted in Jesus’s Olivet Discourse and Revelation simply did not happen in the first century. Jesus predicted that “many” would come claiming, “I am the Christ” (Matt. 24:5), but the first century did not witness many claiming to be the Messiah. The gospel was not proclaimed to the whole world before AD 70 (Matt. 24:14). The cosmic signs concerning the darkening of the sun, the moon not giving its light, and the stars falling from heaven have not occurred (Matt. 24:29). Jesus has not returned on the clouds of heaven in power and great glory (Matt. 24:30). Nor has he come in glory with all his angels to sit on the Davidic throne (Matt. 25:31). The nations have not been gathered before Jesus for judgment with the righteous entering Jesus’s kingdom and the wicked being thrown into eternal fire (Matt. 25:32–46). We have not seen the worldwide judgments of the seals, trumpets, and bowls of Revelation 6–18. Therefore, preterism cannot be true.

HISTORICISM

Historicism asserts that the prophesied events of the Olivet Discourse and the book of Revelation describe history as it has unfolded over the centuries since the first coming of Christ. Events such as earthquakes, persecutions, wars, and false prophets that occur in this age are often viewed as fulfillments of Bible prophecy. Prophecies in Revelation about the dragon, beast, false prophet, and whore of Babylon refer to Satan working through the Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church, including the papacy. During the time of the Reformation, some like Martin Luther believed that the pope and the papacy were the predicted Antichrist. While historicism can be found throughout much of church history, it was popular from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries but has waned considerably in the last century, despite some remaining advocates.

IDEALISM

Unlike preterism, historicism, and futurism, the position of idealism does not stress a past, present, or future fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Instead, it ignores historical realities and views these prophetic passages as teaching timeless truths and principles for Christians of all generations. All Christians should endure trials and difficulties knowing they will be rewarded by God, who is in control of all things. There is a

real battle between good and evil, but good will win in the end. Idealists hold that prophetic truths are not just for first-century Christians (i.e., preterists) or the last generation of Christians (futurists) but for all Christians of all ages.

The appeal of idealism is that it makes the book of Revelation relevant to all generations of Christians. Yet futurism can make the same claim, although with a different emphasis. Plus, idealism does not do justice to the fact that Jesus says that the book of Revelation relates to the past, present, and future: "Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things" (Rev. 1:19 NASB). Idealism fails in that Revelation is speaking of actual historical events with time frames such as 42 months and 1,260 days that cannot be reinterpreted to mean general truths for believers of all ages. These are actual events that must occur in history.

FUTURISM

Futurism asserts that prophecies concerning the tribulation, the rise of the Antichrist, the salvation of Israel, the return of Jesus, the millennium, and the eternal state await future fulfillment. The events of Daniel 9:24–27; Matthew 24–25; and Revelation 6–20 will be fulfilled in a future era. Futurism does not assert that all prophecies in the Bible are still future, because many have already been fulfilled, but it affirms that there are major prophecies that still need to happen, just as others happened in the past.

The case for futurism is strong. First, many prophetic events have simply not yet happened. In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul predicted a coming man of lawlessness who would go into the temple of God declaring himself to be God, thus drawing the wrath of the returning Son of God, who would destroy this evil person (2 Thess. 2:3–4, 8). This event has not yet occurred in history. In 2 Peter 3, Peter told of a coming day of the Lord in which the earth would be purged with fire. Revelation 6–19 details global judgments on the earth that have not happened yet. Also, the return of Jesus remains future.

Futurism holds that the seventieth week of Daniel (Dan. 9:27) and the events it describes are still future. Futurists also realize that major areas of fulfillment coincide with both comings of Jesus. Just as Jesus's first coming brought many areas of Old Testament prophecy to fulfillment, so too will the second coming of Jesus (Acts 3:18–21). Critics sometimes claim that if the book of Revelation refers to events that would not happen for thousands of years, it was irrelevant to John's original audience. This is inaccurate. The events presented in Revelation are linked with imminence, which means that they could break onto the scene at any moment and that Christians must be spiritually ready. With the perspective of hindsight, we know now that these events did not occur for the original readers of Revelation, but that does not mean the warnings of Revelation were irrelevant to the original audience. The warnings and descriptions are relevant for all generations, including our own, even if the Lord should delay his coming.

Futurism coincides with the favored view that the apostle John wrote the book

of Revelation in the AD 90s, well after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. This means that from his standpoint in history, the tribulation he wrote about could not have been fulfilled in AD 70 but must be fulfilled in the future.

Millennial Views

The millennium is one of the most debated issues in eschatology. The debate centers on the meaning of the “thousand years” mentioned six times in Revelation 20:1–7. This “thousand years” refers to the kingdom reign of Jesus with his saints. During this time, Satan is bound (Rev. 20:1–3), and resurrected saints reign with Jesus for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4). After a thousand years, Satan is released and leads a rebellion against Jerusalem but is immediately destroyed (Rev. 20:7–10). This period is called a “millennium,” from the Latin terms *mille*, meaning “thousand,” and *annum*, “year.” The millennium is a thousand-year period. In spite of the clarity of the text, a long-running debate has transpired concerning how to understand the thousand years of Revelation 20:1–7. Three primary views have emerged: amillennialism, postmillennialism, and premillennialism.

AMILLENNIALISM

Amillennialism asserts that the millennium of Revelation 20 is being fulfilled spiritually in this present age between the two comings of Jesus and has nothing to do with an actual thousand years. The term *amillennialism* is somewhat misleading. The prefix *a* means “no.” But those who hold to amillennialism are not saying that there is no millennium. Instead, they claim that the millennial reign of Jesus and the saints is being realized now. Thus, the millennium is currently occurring. Some amillennialists believe that the millennium is being fulfilled from heaven as Jesus and perfected saints rule from heaven. Others believe that the kingdom reign involves the church on earth or the rule of God over the lives of believers. Some combine these two ideas.

In order to teach that the millennium is present and spiritual, amillennialism has to rely heavily on a recapitulation view of Revelation. In this approach, Revelation does not present events sequentially but rather captures events between the two comings of Jesus from multiple angles (perhaps as many as seven) that describe the same period of time. This recapitulation understanding allows the amillennialist to view the second coming of Revelation 19 as occurring at the end of the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20 and not before. So Revelation 20 does not follow Revelation 19 chronologically but takes the reader back to the beginning of the age between Jesus’s two comings, a time that includes the binding of Satan (Rev. 20:1–3) and the reign of the saints (Rev. 20:4). For amillennialists, Satan is bound in this age in the sense that he was defeated at the cross by Christ and is unable to stop the spread of the gospel to the nations. And the saints of God are currently reigning with Jesus. When this era of the millennial kingdom runs its course, then Jesus will return from heaven. At that time, there will be one general resurrection and judgment of the righteous and the wicked, and then the eternal state will commence. Important