

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON THE SECOND
COMING OF CHRIST.*

V. MILLENARIANISM.

IN the earlier papers of this series, by a comparison of the various types of primitive eschatological teaching embodied in the New Testament, we have found complete historical proof that the early followers of Christ were looking forward to a definite moment when, unexpectedly, suddenly, audibly, and visibly Christ will return in bodily form from heaven to earth, to wake up the dead, to change the living servants of Christ, to judge all men, and to bring in the everlasting glory. In this confident and definite expectation, we found complete agreement between the Epistles of Paul, the Synoptist Gospels, the Fourth Gospel, and the Catholic Epistles. The same expectation finds expression also in the Book of Revelation. These various writers also teach that at the coming of Christ evil will be in power. And St. Paul teaches expressly that the appearance of Christ will be preceded by appearance of a new and terrible form of evil, an outward and conspicuous manifestation of evil influences already more or less secretly operating among men; and that this evil power will be brought to nought by the brightness of the appearance of Christ. The Book of Revelation, however, differs from all the rest of the Bible by depicting, before the last apostacy, an earlier and overwhelming defeat of the hostile powers, lasting in its effects for a thousand years. In other words, the Book of Revelation teaches two interpositions of supernatural power, each overturning, one for a time, the other finally, the enemies of God and man. The relation of these two victories of good over evil to the second coming of Christ so frequently announced in the New Testament demands now further enquiry.

The question before us is whether the vision of Christ on

a white horse depicted in Revelation xix. 11, or that depicted in chapter xx. 11 on "a great white throne," corresponds to the audible and visible and bodily return of Christ so frequently announced in the other books of the New Testament and indeed in Revelation i. 7, xxii. 12, 20. This question must be answered by a comparison of the two visions and of the events following them with the harmonious teaching of the rest of the New Testament.

The very close similarity in thought and phrase between Revelation xx. 11-15 and Matthew xxv. 31-46 at once attracts attention. In each account, Christ sits upon a throne and all mankind stand before Him and are judged by Him according to their works. In exact agreement with these passages is John v. 28, 29, where at the bidding of Christ all the dead leave their graves and go forth to life or to judgment according as they have done things good or bad. Very similar also is 2 Thessalonians i. 6-10, where we read that Christ at His revelation from heaven will give relief to His servants but eternal destruction to those who obey not the Gospel. This similarity is a strong presumption that these four passages refer to the same solemn event.

On the other hand, the vision of Christ in Revelation xix. 11-16 and the events portrayed in verses 17-21 present not nearly so many points of coincidence with the teaching of the New Testament about the second coming of Christ. For nowhere else is Christ's coming represented as that of a soldier armed for fight, nor is the destruction which follows His coming represented as a military overthrow. He comes, not as a soldier for the fight, but as a judge armed with irresistible power.

This preliminary judgment is confirmed by insuperable difficulties involved in the supposition that the coming of Christ for which the early Christians were waiting will be followed by the Millennium and Apostacy described in

Revelation xx. 1-9. This will appear if we pursue this supposition to its consequences, taking into our account the indisputable teaching of other parts of the New Testament.

We must conceive the world going on in its usual course, and evil in great power. In a moment, as in the earlier papers we have learnt, a voice from heaven is heard, and Christ appears. At that voice, and to meet their appearing Lord, the murdered servants of Christ wake up from the sleep of death. But not these only. For we cannot conceive this marked honour given only to those who have actually shed their blood for Christ when so many others, *e.g.* Wycliffe and Luther, were equally faithful and equally ready to die for Him. If there be, before the Millennium, a bodily resurrection, it must be shared by all the faithful and departed servants of Christ. And along with these risen ones, we must conceive, according to the plain teaching of 1 Corinthians xv. 52, 1 Thessalonians iv. 16, that the righteous then living will be changed and caught up to meet Christ. What about the living children of living believers? Infants, we may suppose, will be caught up with their parents. But what about those in their teens? Surely there will be a selection, the good ones taken and the bad ones left behind along with those who, not being servants of Christ, will have no part in the resurrection which will immediately follow the voice and appearance of Christ.

What becomes of the adult unsaved ones? Are we to suppose that they will continue on earth, eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage, in successive generations? And what will be the moral state of mankind when the salt of the earth and the light of the world are removed? It might be thought that it will become a pandemonium. We must however remember that at the beginning of the Millennium the prince of darkness has been bound. But unfortunately there are no servants of Christ

left on earth to take advantage of this removal of the great enemy of God and man and to preach to the wicked a Gospel of repentance. And of any general turning to God we have no hint in Revelation xx. 1-6, the only passage in the whole Bible which speaks about the Millennium.

Let us now try to follow, on the supposition before us, the risen servants of Christ. Their bodily resurrection, and such is expressly mentioned in 1 Corinthians xv. 23, 35, 44 as following at once the coming of Christ, implies a definite place. Where are they? Not on earth. For this is still occupied by the unsaved, who were not caught up to meet Christ. And we cannot conceive mingled together on the same planet some who have yet to die and others who have passed through death and will die no more. Such confusion of the present age with the age to come is in the last degree unlikely. If not on earth, are we to suppose them to be somewhere between earth and heaven, visible to the wicked still living and dying on earth? This suggestion would so completely change the conditions of human life and probation on earth as to make its continuance utterly incomprehensible. Or are we to suppose that the risen ones and the changed survivors will suddenly vanish from earth into the unseen world, in some such way as the ascending body of Christ vanished from His disciples' view? In this case, the second coming of Christ would be a voice and appearance of Christ from heaven, heard and seen¹ by all men, yet followed by His disappearance and the disappearance of all the good people then living on earth. Of such disappearance of Christ after His return, we have no hint in the New Testament; and it contradicts the whole tenor of its teaching on this subject.

Touching the condition of the world during the Millennium, the supposition we are considering leaves us in utter perplexity. The naughty children of pious and living parents

¹ Revelation i. 7.

have been left to the mercy of a race from which all the righteous have been taken away. Satan is bound. But, unless the risen ones are sent to proclaim the Gospel to the unsaved, there are none to teach them. The only good information we have about the world is that at the close of the Millennium it contains (Revelation xx. 9) "a camp of the saints."

After a long period, described as "a thousand years," during which Satan is bound, he is liberated, and returns to the earth. He is welcomed by a host as numerous "as the sand of the sea," who follow him to make war against the people of God. This quick and great apostacy proves that the Millennium is no triumphant and universal reign of righteousness. And it disproves the supposition that during the thousand years Christ is reigning visibly on earth. For we cannot conceive such revolt in His visible presence, nor can we conceive that at the release of Satan Christ will retreat, even for a short time, from the realm over which He has reigned so long. In any case, the triumph of Satan is short. Fire falls suddenly from heaven, a great throne appears, the books are opened, and all men, good and bad, are judged according to their works,

The above difficulties and contradictions are serious objections to the hypothesis which involves them.

The theory of a pre-millennial advent of Christ lies open to other insuperable objections. Our Lord asserts clearly in Matthew xxiv. 29, Mark xiii. 24, 25, that at His return the sun and moon will cease to shine and the stars fall from heaven. This implies a dissolution of nature. A still more graphic picture of this dissolution is given in Revelation vi. 12-17, as heralding the great day of the anger of God. Scarcely less graphic is the picture given in Revelation xx. 11, "from whose face fled the earth and the heaven, and place was not found for them." Now the dissolution of nature described in this last passage evidently follows the

Millennium. For it is impossible to separate the vision in Revelation xx. 11 from the apostacy immediately preceding it; and this is said expressly in verse 7 to follow the Millennium. In other words, the Book of Revelation announces a dissolution of nature following the Millennium. Our Lord announced, as we have seen, a similar dissolution to accompany His second coming. If, then, this coming precedes the Millennium, there will be two dissolutions of nature, separated by more than a thousand years; and, between these two catastrophes, a tremendous assault by a great multitude of followers of Satan against the servants of God.

Still further difficulties surround the theory before us. In Matthew xxv. 31-46 we read, "When the Son of Man shall come in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit upon the throne of His glory, and there will be gathered together before Him all the nations, and He will separate them one from another as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." Our Lord concludes by announcing that those on His left hand "will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." Indisputably, the words, "when the Son of Man comes," refer to that one definite coming of which Christ spoke so much. This is placed beyond doubt by the complete harmony of all that Christ says about this great event, which was ever in His thoughts. If, then, Christ's return is to be followed by the Millennium described in Revelation xx. 1-6, we must suppose that after this solemn separation the goats will again break in upon the sheep with the terrible assault depicted in Revelation xx. 9 as following the Millennium. This is inconceivable.

Other difficulties remain. Our Lord announces in John v. 28, 29 that "an hour cometh in which all that are in the grave will hear His voice and will go forth, they that have done the good things to a resurrection of life, and they that

have done the evil things to a resurrection of judgment." This announcement is in close accord with Revelation xx. 13-15, where we read, "The sea gave up the dead in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead in them; and they were judged, each according to their works. . . . And if any one was not found written in the Book of Life, he was cast into the lake of fire." Each of these passages suggests irresistibly one universal resurrection and judgment. The theory we are discussing requires us to believe that within the hour of which Christ speaks there will be two bodily resurrections (in addition to the spiritual resurrection referred to in John v. 25, Ephesians ii. 6), separated by more than a thousand years, one of the righteous only, the other of righteous and wicked.

That an earlier resurrection of the righteous is not asserted or suggested in 1 Thessalonians iv. 16, 1 Corinthians xv. 23, I have already proved on pages 100, 105, of my second paper.

One more objection here demands notice. In John vi. 39, 40, 44, Christ announces that He will raise His people "on the last day." The same hope is expressed by Martha in John xi. 24. It is altogether incongruous to include in "the last day" events so dissimilar as the resurrection of the righteous, the thousand years' bondage of Satan, his release, the assault of Gog and Magog and its overthrow, and the final judgment. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians xv. 52, St. Paul speaks of the voice which will awake the dead servants of Christ, and change the living, including himself and his readers, as "the last trumpet." Now, if the righteous are to be raised before the Millennium and the wicked after it, there will be two resurrections; and, since the wicked are to be summoned to judgment by the voice of Christ, this voice must be the last trumpet, and the earlier voice, which will summon those to whom St. Paul refers in 1 Corinthians xv. 52, cannot be so described.

It will be not the last trumpet, but perhaps the last but one.

Such are the many insuperable difficulties surrounding the hypothesis of a pre-millennial advent of Christ. It breaks up the one definite coming for which His disciples were waiting into two comings separated by more than a thousand years, each heralded by a trumpet voice and followed by a resurrection of the dead and a dissolution of nature. The period between these two comings and trumpets and resurrections is left in inextricable confusion, and concludes with a tremendous assault of the evil against the good.

We now ask, What evidence can be brought in favour of the hypothesis before us, to set against the above insuperable objections? No direct evidence. For throughout the New Testament we find no hint of two bodily comings of Christ and of two bodily resurrections, which are essential elements of the theory we are considering. The only evidence which can be adduced for a pre-millennial advent of Christ is the vision of Christ on a white horse in Revelation xix. 11, and the first resurrection in chapter xx. 6. For certainly nowhere else in the Bible do we read of a reign of Christ to be followed by apostacy. Moreover, the force of this scanty evidence rests on the assumption that these visions cannot find their realisation apart from the definite bodily return of Christ for which His earlier followers were waiting. In other words, we are asked to modify and transform the abundant, and various, and harmonious teaching of the New Testament about the second coming of Christ in deference to an exposition of seventeen verses of the most mysterious and difficult book in the Bible. Even if this exposition were indisputable, we might fairly ask whether it is safe to throw into confusion, for such a reason, the plain teaching of the rest of the New Testament. But the exposition which is made to bear the burden of issues so

great is far from certain, or rather, is in itself improbable; and, as we have seen, another exposition involving no such confusion is at once suggested by the plain meaning of the words used in the passage in question.

It is no part of my present task to explain as a whole the imagery of the very difficult Book of Revelation. But, indisputably, many of its pictures must have a purely spiritual meaning, *i.e.*, they must depict conditions and events which exist and take place only in the spiritual world, apart from any visible disturbance of the course of external nature. As examples, I must quote the first five seals in Revelation vi. 1-11. On the other hand, the sixth seal, in verses 12-17, evidently breaks through the veil and describes, in such symbolic form as men on earth can understand, events which will visibly set aside the ordinary course of nature. This intermingling of the unseen and the seen, often without indication of the transition, warns us to use special caution in exposition of the pictures of this mysterious book. The only safe rule is to interpret the pictures in the light of the plain teaching of the rest of the New Testament. The theory before us reverses this method, and sets aside the plain meaning of plain proof in deference to an interpretation of one series of difficult metaphors.

The pictures of Christ coming on a white horse, of the angel in the sun calling the birds to feast on the victims about to be slain, of the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies marching to battle, of the angel with a chain binding Satan, have very little in common with the metaphors used to describe the coming of Christ to judgment. And they certainly cannot be interpreted literally. They are therefore a very unsafe foundation on which to build an important doctrine. Moreover, we have no hint that "the souls" of the martyrs who lived and reigned with Christ had experienced a bodily resurrection. In

Revelation vi. 9-11, we have another vision of martyred "souls" who are bidden to wait until their brethren, like themselves, have been slain. These impatient souls cannot have entered into the consummation involved in the resurrection of the body. Moreover, that in John v. 25-29 we read of two resurrections in close juxtaposition, one spiritual and the other bodily, and that St. Paul taught frequently that believers are already risen with Christ, warns us not hastily to assume that "the First Resurrection" must necessarily be a resurrection of the body. In short, the exposition upon which is built the doctrine of the pre-millennial advent of Christ has no foundation in sound exegesis of the New Testament. It may therefore be dismissed as having no place in the Gospel of Christ.

The doctrine I have endeavoured to overturn owes its acceptance by not a few sincere and earnest Christians to a natural rebound from another doctrine still further removed from the teaching of the New Testament, yet prevalent in some circles of religious activity. The doctrine of the second coming of Christ, which moulded the entire thought of His early followers, has been practically ignored by many modern Christians. An indefinite idea has silently grown up among them that the departed servants of Christ go at death to their full and final reward, and that the Gospel will make progress among men until, by its instrumentality, the whole world and all human hearts are brought to bow in unreserved homage to Christ. These doctrines leave no place for His bodily return to earth. For His dead servants have already attained their full consummation, and the whole purpose of God touching His kingdom among men will be accomplished in the ordinary course of the Gospel of Christ. They who hold this view say little or nothing about the second coming of Christ. It lies outside their spiritual horizon. That which to the early Christians was so much, is nothing to them. Against

this oversight of so large an element of the teaching of the New Testament, the doctrine which in this paper I have combated is an extreme revolt. And many sympathise with the revolt because they know enough of the New Testament to condemn the loose theology just mentioned. Unfortunately, by taking up a theory which breaks down by the weight of its own absurdity, they do something indirectly to strengthen the belief which they reject. The only safe remedy is to reinstate, by careful exegesis, the actual teaching of the New Testament.

Closely connected with the doctrine of the pre-millennial Advent is the question of the time of Christ's return. Most of its advocates expect an early return, almost at any hour. Such early return, they who reject this doctrine cannot expect. For, whatever they may think about the Millennium, to them St. Paul's warning to the Thessalonican Christians that the Day of the Lord was not close at hand, is still valid. He taught plainly, in 2 Thessalonians ii. 3-12, that Christ will not come until first have come a new and terrible form of evil. In his day, all this was quite consistent with an expectation that Christ might return during the lifetime of men then living. For so rapid had been the recent development of the kingdom of God that a single lifetime seemed sufficient for the appearance of the Man of Sin, and for his destruction by the visible return of Christ. Such rapid development we cannot expect now. During eighteen centuries no new form of evil has appeared, nothing which can for a moment be identified with the great enemy about whom St. Paul wrote. And the analogy of these centuries makes an early and sudden appearance most unlikely. Moreover the present age, and those preceding it, have been times of spiritual progress; and the spiritual forces at work for good in the world bear no marks of exhaustion. We cannot conceive that this progress, wrought by God through ordinary instruments,

will be interrupted by the hand of God. The time of Christ's return must be one of spiritual stagnation and retrogression. Consequently, assured as we are that a moment will come when unexpectedly Christ will lay His hand upon the wheels of time and stop them for ever, and sweep away the platform on which they have revolved so long, and build upon its ruins a New Earth and Heaven, we cannot expect this longed-for consummation in our own lifetime. Weary as we are with happy toil, we shall lay us down for our last sleep in His arms till the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible.

In his able volume on *The Revelation of St. John*, Dr. Milligan, after calling attention to the difficulties which make impossible the theory of a pre-millennial Advent, suggests that "the thousand years," and the "little time" which follows them, do not denote duration in time, but only the idea of completeness. He interprets these periods as simultaneous, and as each co-extensive with the whole Christian dispensation, during which he supposes that in reference to the saints Satan will be completely bound, but in reference to others in some measure free. So on page 210: "Satan is bound for a thousand years—*i.e.* he is completely bound. The saints reign for a thousand years—*i.e.* they are introduced into a state of perfect and glorious victory." Also on page 213: "When it is said Satan shall be loosed 'for a little time,' the meaning is that he shall be loosed for *the whole Christian age.*" The only examples he gives of this remarkable and unlikely method of exposition are Ezekiel xxxix. 9, where we read that, after the destruction of Magog, the inhabitants of the cities of Israel will for seven years burn the weapons of the conquered and will need no other fuel; and verse 12, where we are told that the house of Israel will be for seven years burying the slain

of Gog and purifying the land from the presence of their corpses.

These examples are no proof whatever that in symbolic language longer or shorter periods of time may denote merely greater or less completeness. For in this case the greatness of the overthrow is proved by the length of time during which the captured weapons lasted for fuel and the length of time required to bury the dead. But the periods of time mentioned in Revelation xx. 3-7 afford no such indications of completeness. Unless consecutive periods of time and events are referred to in the words of verse 7, "when the thousand years shall be accomplished, Satan shall be loosed from his prison," no intelligible meaning can be given to symbolic language. Moreover, to say that Satan is bound, "in order that he may not deceive the nations any more until the thousand years are completed," as we read in verse 3, and then to say, as we read in verse 8, that at the same time he will "go forth to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth," is flat contradiction. Dr. Milligan's interpretation is as baseless in exegesis, and as absurd, as that which it is designed to supersede.

In a volume entitled *Parousia*, Mr. J. Stuart Russell has endeavoured to prove, if I understand him correctly, that the coming of Christ announced in the New Testament took place at the destruction of Jerusalem. He argues that Christ promised to return during the lifetime of the men of His own day; and from this, as a sure starting point, he infers with perfect confidence that He did then return, viz. at the fall of the Jewish state. All else in the New Testament is brought, by great exegetical violence, into harmony with this foregone conclusion. The impossibility of this exegesis has been made evident by the exposition in this series of papers of the chief passages bearing upon the subject. Such distortion of the plain meaning of plain words

of Holy Scripture cannot help forward theological research.

The results of this paper are chiefly negative. Its aim has been to disprove certain interpretations which have seriously distorted the teaching of the New Testament about the second coming of Christ and have done much to bring the whole subject into contempt or disregard.

In a concluding paper I shall discuss the spiritual and practical significance of the second coming of Christ and its bearing upon the thought and life of the present day.

JOSEPH AGAR BEEB.