

1. The Prophetic Context of the Millennium

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Introduction

The Biblical doctrine of the coming millennial kingdom of Christ is one of the greatest themes of divine revelation. In its simple definition, the millennium is the reign of Christ for one thousand years on the earth following His second coming. As such it is the consummating dispensation of human history on earth. Though millennial truth is essentially eschatological, it is integral to the entire volume of Scripture and its proper understanding is an important essential to theology as a whole. Millennialism cannot therefore be brushed aside as a dispute on the interpretation of [Revelation 20](#), but is rather the product of a system of Biblical interpretation established as the positive teaching of both Testaments. It constitutes a refutation of both amillennialism and postmillennialism.

In discussing the great theme of the kingdom and prophecy, Nathaniel West summarized the importance of millennial truth in these words: "From first to last, the Kingdom of God on earth, its inception, progress, conduct, and consummation in glory, is the one theme of Old Testament prophecy. To this end were the covenants with Christ, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David. To this end was the choice of the one national 'Israel,' the 'choice forever,' as a prophetic, priestly, kingly nation, a messianic and mediatorial nation, the one national 'Servant of Jehovah,' and national Son of God, standing between God and mankind, and bringing salvation to a lost world; a people from whom should come the one personal 'Israel,' Prophet, Priest, and King, the one Mediator and true Messiah, Seed of the Woman, Seed of Abraham, Seed of David, Son of Man and Son of God, in whom all nations should bless themselves—*Jesus Christ*. Identified with Him, individually, and called by His name, stands Israel collectively, in His whole Messianic work and kingdom. Neither acts without the other. The Pentateuch prophecies refer chiefly to the people. The Messianic Psalms emphasize the King, the Kingdom, and the Priest. Isaiah dwells upon the prophetic character of Israel; Ezekiel displays the priestly; Daniel reveals the kingly; Zechariah blends all in one. *Old Testament prophecy knows no other subjects of discourse than Israel, Messiah, and the nations*. As to the kingdom, Israel had it, under the Old Testament, in its outward form; the Gentiles have it under the New Testament in its inward form; in the age to come, Jews and Gentiles together,

shall have it, both forms in one, one kingdom of Messiah, spiritual, visible and glorious, with Israel still the central people, the prelude of the New Jerusalem and the nations walking in its light forever”(Nathaniel West, *The Thousand Years in Both Testaments*, pp. 4-5).

Though premillenarians have been in essential agreement on the central fact of the coming of Christ as preceding the thousand-year reign, a variety of detail is found in the exposition of the millennium itself. This is also true of the prophetic context of the millennium, that sequence of important events which anticipate and prepare the way for the coming of Christ and His reign upon the earth. Much of the existing confusion, however, is immediately dissipated if the view is followed that the rapture of the church occurs first and is followed by the fulfillment of the prophesied seventieth week of Israel. Under this interpretation, a tremendous succession of events unfolds as preparing the way for the coming of the millennial kingdom. If the church is removed before this period of trouble, it becomes immediately clear that the tribulation is a divine preparation and prophetic sign of the approaching second coming of Christ. Though many details of the tribulation have already been discussed in connection with the rapture question, the same area of prophetic revelation may now be examined as a prelude to the millennium.

The Nature of the Tribulation

The Old Testament as well as the New constantly warns that there will be a time of trouble preceding the millennial kingdom of Christ. This period of trial is in sharp contrast to tribulations which characterize the experience of saints in all ages. The future period is described as having certain specific characteristics which have never been fulfilled and cannot be fulfilled until the church is raptured. In general, this future time of trouble will concern three divisions of humanity: (1) The nation Israel; (2) the nations or the pagan Gentile world; (3) the elect saints who will live in that time of trouble. Divine dealing with each of these three groups differs widely.

Place of Israel in the tribulation. For the nation Israel the tribulation will be a time of discipline and purging in preparation for the coming millennial kingdom. It stands in contrast to all previous times of trial and discipline and is repeatedly declared to be unprecedented in its character and severity. It is predicted that Israel's trials will bring spiritual revival to a portion of the nation and a godly

remnant will emerge. Passages which deal with the tribulation reveal that when this has been realized the tribulation will close with Israel's deliverance accomplished by the return of Christ as the Messiah of Israel. Israel will then be regathered from all over the earth, restored as a nation, and given a place of honor, safety and prominence in the millennial kingdom.

Place of Gentiles in the tribulation. For the Gentiles, the tribulation marks the close of the extended period of the "times of the Gentiles" ([Luke 21:24](#)), that period marked by Gentile control of Jerusalem since 600 B.C. During the tribulation, frightful judgments will be poured out upon the Gentiles, resulting in utter destruction of their cities and civilization and leading to their complete doom at the time of the return of Christ. During the tribulation, a world government will come into being headed by a dictator of unprecedented evil and guilty of utter blasphemy against the true God. For a time he will hold the entire world in his power, a satanic imitation of the true reign of Christ in the millennial kingdom. His attempt to deify himself begins the "great tribulation" ([Matt 24:21](#)), with its terrible persecution of Jew and Christian. The great tribulation is brought to its close by the second advent of Christ and destruction of the world power of Gentiles as predicted by Daniel and many prophetic portions of the Old and New Testaments.

The elect in the tribulation. The elect or the saved of the tribulation period are composed of both Jews and Gentiles who turn to Christ for salvation. During the early part of the period between the rapture and the second coming of Christ, there is some religious freedom as indicated by the restoration of Jewish sacrifices. With the beginning of the great tribulation, however, this freedom is abruptly ended, and Jewish sacrifices cease. All who oppose the deification and worship of the world dictator are subject to persecution. Both Jew and Christian become the objects of this satanic oppression, and many are martyred. The elect are delivered by the return of Christ at the close of the tribulation period.

The Scriptures which present the revelation of this coming tribulation constantly reiterate that it will be a time of trouble without precedent in the history of the world. It will be a climactic period, expressly designed by a sovereign God to bring the forces of evil to a crescendo before the millennial reign of Christ which will be characterized by peace and righteousness. The millennial kingdom is therefore set off from preceding dispensations by this unmistakable future period of trial,

which serves to make evident that both the tribulation and the millennium which follows are as yet unfulfilled.

The Tribulation in the Old Testament

The first reference to the tribulation as such is found in [Deuteronomy 4:29-30](#): “But from thence ye shall seek Jehovah thy God, and thou shalt find him, when thou searchest after him with all thy heart and with all thy soul. When thou art in tribulation, and all these things are come upon thee, in the latter days thou shalt return to Jehovah thy God, and hearken unto his voice.” According to this first reference, the tribulation is the occasion for some in Israel turning to the Lord and constitutes a divine preparation for the kingdom which will follow.

The Prophet Jeremiah contributes one of the most important Old Testament revelations as recorded in [Jeremiah 30:4-11](#). The coming tribulation is described as inducing terror on the part of those who will be living at that time. The period itself is described: “Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob’s trouble; but he shall be saved out of it” ([Jer 30:7](#)). The prophecy continues with a prediction of the millennial scene when Jews will no longer be under the yoke of Gentile bondage (v. 8) and instead will be under the rule of Jehovah and David, their king (v. 9). On the basis of this glorious prospect, Israel is encouraged not to fear but instead to look forward to the deliverance which will come when they return from their captivities and are brought back to their land to enjoy peace and quiet where “none shall make him afraid” (v. 10).

This passage from the prophecy of Jeremiah makes clear that this time of trouble is distinct from any preceding trial of Israel. It states flatly “that none is like it” (v. 7). It also indicates that the time of trouble will be followed immediately not by the eternal state but by Israel restored to the land and delivered from Gentile political domination. Jeremiah therefore includes all the major elements of the tribulation and sets it in a millennial context as a necessary antecedent to the glory of the kingdom.

One of the most important Old Testament predictions comes from the pen of the Prophet Daniel and is contained in [Daniel 9:27](#). If the futuristic interpretation of this passage be accepted, it yields an important chronology for the context of the millennium. The sixty-nine “weeks” of Daniel (9:24-26) have demonstrated by their fulfillment that the time unit is a year—each “week” being a period of seven

years. By this token the seventieth week described in [Daniel 9:27](#) must also represent a period of seven years. As no such period followed immediately the fulfillment of the sixty-ninth week, the futuristic interpretation of the passage looks for fulfillment in the last seven years preceding the second advent of Christ to establish His millennial kingdom. The one making the covenant mentioned in [Daniel 9:27](#) is identified with “the prince that shall come” of verse 26 and is the same individual who becomes the dictator of the whole world during the tribulation time. The arguments for and against this interpretation have been stated in an abundance of scholarly literature and need not be debated again here (cf. Sir Robert Anderson, *The Coming Prince*, pp. 51-129; Robert Culver, *Daniel and the Latter Days*, pp. 135-60; H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on Daniel*, pp. 155-71; A. C. Gaebelien, *Daniel*, pp. 119-50).

According to Daniel’s prophecy, the last seven years before the second advent will begin with a covenant between the prince and the people of Israel. It is evidently a covenant of protection and of religious liberty under which Israel is free to re-establish their ancient system of sacrifices. In the middle of the seven years, the covenant is broken and the sacrifices cease. This may be done in connection with the effort to deify the world ruler of that day which would make the worship of Israel as well as the true faith of believers in Christ illegal. Thus begins the great tribulation, the period of trial never before experienced for all who would worship the true God. This time of tribulation must run its course, “even unto the full end” ([Dan 9:27](#)), but it is constantly reiterated in Scripture that deliverance will come with the second advent of Christ. According to Daniel’s prophecy, this will occur seven years after the covenant is made, and three and one half years after the beginning of the great tribulation.

In Daniel’s prophecy, as in Jeremiah, the period of trouble is followed by deliverance and restoration of Israel as a nation. According to [Daniel 12:1](#), the consummation of the period of trouble in blessing is assured: “There shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book.” In other portions of Daniel, further information is given concerning the tribulation and, though Daniel does not occupy himself pre-eminently with the millennial kingdom itself, it is evident that the consummation of the tribulation ushers in a time of victory and peace. Details of the tribulation itself are given in [Daniel 7:7-8](#), 19-27; 11:36-45 ; 12:11-13 .

Not only are Daniel and Jeremiah clear on this important truth but confirmation is found in most of the minor prophets in which the dominant theme is the future time of trouble for Israel and the ultimate deliverance and restoration of Israel nevertheless. Important passages on the theme in the Minor Prophets are [Joel 2:1-11](#), 28-32; [Zephaniah 1:14-18](#); [Zechariah 13:8-14:2](#) . The Old Testament revelation of the tribulation as a whole is therefore amazingly complete and confirms in general the premillennial concept of the millennial kingdom to follow the tribulation.

The New Testament Doctrine of the Tribulation

In the prophetic ministry of Christ a notable confirmation of this Old Testament teaching is found, in the New Testament as contained in the Olivet Discourse dealing with signs and exhortations relative to the coming of the Lord. According to [Matthew 24:15-30](#), the specific details of the tribulation are presented as signs of the coming of the Lord. [Matthew 24:15](#) refers to the abomination of desolation of which Daniel spoke ([Dan 9:27](#); [12:11](#)). Like Jeremiah and Daniel, Christ declares that this coming time of trouble will be unprecedented: “For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world until now, no, nor ever shall be” ([Matt 24:21](#)). As in the Old Testament, the tribulation is primarily a divine dealing with Israel, but is also the consummation and final display of Gentile world dominion. Like the Old Testament prophecies, Christ also teaches that the second advent will “immediately” follow the tribulation ([Matt 24:29-30](#)).

The theme of divine revelation concerning the tribulation is found occasionally in the Pauline epistles and in [1 Thessalonians 5:1-11](#) under the terminology of “day of the Lord.” The period is revealed to be one in which unbelievers will experience sudden destruction as those who walk in darkness in contrast to “the children of light” who will be delivered. A particular comfort to the church is the fact that “God appointed us not unto wrath, but unto the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” ([1 Thess 5:9](#)). In [2 Thessalonians 2:1-12](#), attention is directed to the fact that the tribulation will be dominated by “the man of sin” (v. 3) “whose coming is according to the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders” (v. 9). The tribulation period is therefore described as that specific future time when the man of sin will reign.

Though other Scriptures allude to the period, the major New Testament revelation is found in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, chapters 4—19 .

Approximately fifteen chapters of the book are used to describe this time of trouble. Even a casual reading of these stupendous events will disclose a period exceeding in importance all other periods in human history which can only be explained as the final throes of the forces of evil prior to the second advent of Christ. Only by following an allegorical or spiritualized interpretation of the tremendous events predicted can these great prophetic Scriptures be robbed of their intended meaning. In the Book of Revelation, however, as in other passages dealing with the tribulation, the time of trouble is revealed as temporary and Israel, even though in great distress, will be ultimately delivered. It is made plain in chapter 19 that the second advent of Christ is the cause for the ultimate destruction of Gentile power in the world and at the same time occasions the introduction of the thousand years of Christ's reign upon the earth.

As has been indicated in previous discussions, nowhere does the church appear in these tremendous scenes. The events of the tribulation have their major significance as the consummation of "the times of the Gentiles" and a divine preparation of the nation Israel for their role of restoration and blessing in the millennium. The tribulation is therefore a major aspect of the prophetic context of the millennium.

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