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Review of Chung and Mathewson, *Models of Premillennialism*

David Woods

Chung SW and Mathewson D 2018. *Models of Premillennialism*. Eugene: Cascade Books.

1. Background of the authors

Sung Wook Chung is Professor of Christian Theology and Director of Asian Initiative at Denver Seminary, where he has worked since 2005. He is an Evangelical scholar with a substantial list of publications and a record of service in both church and mission organisation leadership. David Mathewson is also on faculty at Denver Seminary where he has served as a New Testament scholar since 2011. He is well-published, particularly in the areas of Biblical Greek and the book of Revelation.

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1 The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

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2. Purpose and approach

The Bible refers to a period of a thousand years (i.e. a millennium) explicitly only in Revelation 20, both without and with the definite article.[2] Premillennialism is an eschatological interpretation in which Christ will return prior to the millennium (hence *pre* millennial). The purpose of *Models of Premillennialism* is to provide an overview of how premillennial eschatology has been constructed by its proponents over the past nineteen hundred years, so that readers can understand the main characteristics of each model[3] and what distinguishes it from the others. Without undue pressure to adopt any particular model, the authors seek to inform readers sufficiently to enable them to decide their own preferred form of premillennialism. Outstanding to me was their choice to avoid similar evaluation of postmillennialism and amillennialism, which are only mentioned in passing. This reduces their scope enormously, sparing the reader from a rapid spiral of complexity found in other such literature. (Of course, readers still need to establish their own preference of millennialism unless they are content to accept premillennialism on account of it being demonstrably more ancient than postmillennialism and amillennialism).

2 The authors (p. xi) claim it appears only in Rev 20:4-6. I see it *(chilia etē,* a thousand years) from 20:2-7.

3 In this context, a 'model' refers to an interpretation of scriptural prophecy and its resulting eschatological outlook. Each major model has characteristics that distinguish it from the others, though diverse versions of a model may exist by variation of its parameters (i.e. different interpretations of some biblical texts yet within the broad boundary of that model's distinctive features.)

Models of Premillennialism is written for anyone who is willing to study biblical eschatology; it is not for experts; it does not require any knowledge of biblical Greek; and it is not essentially exegetical. Its aim is more modest, and its title encapsulates its focus perfectly.

3. Structure

Models of Premillennialism presents four such models, as well as several forms of premillennial eschatology propounded by influential leaders in South Korea, in five chapters. Apart from the introduction and conclusion, the chapters are not co-authored; Chung writes three chapters and Mathewson contributes two. The chapters are roughly sequenced according to the chronological development of each model, starting with historic premillennialism by Chung. He then tackles classical dispensational premillennialism in chapter 2, followed by Mathewson's review of progressive dispensationalism in chapter 3. In chapter 4, Mathewson continues to describe what he calls thematic millennialism, with Chung authoring the final chapter on historic premillennialism in South Korea. Thus, the chapters and authors are:

1. Historic premillennialism, by Chung
2. Classical Dispensational Premillennialism, by Chung
3. Progressive Dispensationalism, by Mathewson
4. Thematic Millennialism, by Mathewson
5. Historic Premillennialism in South Korea, by Chung

The format of the chapters varies somewhat, but each chapter includes an overview of its model, essential aspects of that model's hermeneutics, key historical developments and the author's critique.

This short book of 138 pages ends with a helpful bibliography, author index and scripture index.

4. Summary and critique

Introduction

In the co-authored introduction, *Models of Premillennialism* begins by presenting Revelation 20:4–6 as the central text for premillennial eschatology, and then provides a simple, clear way to classify one's eschatology: amillennialism interprets the millennium not as a future era but as a symbol of the present time between the two advents of Christ; postmillennialism regards the millennium as a still future 'golden age' that leads up to the return of Christ. Though premillennialists agree that the millennium is still in the future, they insist that it will only *begin* with the Second Coming.

Historical premillennialism

Chung begins chapter 1 by pointing out that historic premillennialism is the majority view of evangelical *theologians* (not *all* Evangelicals) today. Hermeneutically, historic premillennialism interprets the events of Revelation 20 literally and futuristically. Moreover, Revelation 19–20 flows chronologically: Christ's return in chapter 19 brings about the punishment of the beast and the false prophet; chapter 20 says that the devil follows them, being bound for a thousand years while those saints who attained the first resurrection reign with Christ on earth. After this comes the final rebellion, the judgment of the devil and of all people who were not previously resurrected. Maintaining this chronological hermeneutic in Revelation, the church is to experience the great tribulation before its deliverance at the *parousia* (appearance of Christ, i.e. the Second Coming), and the millennium itself is the time between the two resurrections.[4]

4 Rev. 20:5-6 refers explicitly to 'the first resurrection,' while vv.12-13 speak of the dead 'standing before the throne' at their judgment.

The millennium is not the so-called eternal state but rather the penultimate state before it, because historic premillennialism foresees a restoration of the world before 'the new earth' of Revelation 21:1 (cf. Isa 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet 3:13).

The authors regard historic premillennialism as the most scriptural position, but Chung offers little critical engagement, only mentioning that the duration of the millennium and its inhabitants are in question (i.e. whether it is literally one thousand years and whether unbelievers enter it). Chung continues with a brief history of historic premillennialism, from Polycarp (who was reportedly taught by the apostle John) to the present time. While the review is all too brief,[5] Chung provides a helpful summary; he offers reasons for the decline in popularity of historic premillennialism from the late fourth century and details its revival under prominent modern theologians and biblical scholars, including Gundry, Carson, Moo, Blomberg, Osborne, Keener, Witherington, Erickson, Grudem and Demarest (among others!) In doing so, Chung justifies his claim that this is the eschatological model upheld by most of today's evangelical theologians.

5 I should have liked to see mention of Clement, Hegesippus and Nepos, and the *Didache.*

Classical dispensational premillennialism

Classical dispensationalism, Chung explains, accounts for various means of salvation across seven dispensations of human existence, from its origins until its future final days on earth. On this timeline, the millennium is the last dispensation, the era when Christ will reign on earth. Moreover, classical dispensationalism regards Jews as having unique benefits in all ages, including the present, 'church' age and the coming millennial age—even a status of privilege above that of the church—as God fulfils his promises to Israel via its ancient prophets in a literal way. Thus Revelation 20 is interpreted as both literal and futurist, as opposed to symbolic or preterist, not least of all because Peter's warning, that the devil is 'looking for someone to devour' (1 Pet 5:8), would seem to clash with the imprisonment of the devil during the millennium (Rev 20:1–3). Surprisingly, according to most classical dispensationalists, those who rule over the earth in Revelation 20:4–6 are not Christian martyrs, but 'the Jews.' Chung soon clarifies that this can mean either Jewish martyrs or resurrected Jews, but their relation to the witnesses for Jesus who were beheaded and resurrected, and also reign with Christ, is not spelled out. If one assumes the two groups are the same people, then one is left wondering about other Jewish martyrs as well as Christian martyrs from among the nations.

Significant to this eschatological model is that Revelation 19–20 are read *chronologically,* starting with the *parousia* and the condemnation of the beast and false prophet to the lake of fire, in chapter 19, then followed by the millennium and then the devil's condemnation to join them there forever, in chapter 20.

Classical dispensationalism typically foresees the rapture of the church before the great tribulation[6] which is characterised by the Antichrist's persecution of 'the Jews'. Finally, after seven years (based on Dan 9:24–27), the *parousia* of Jesus brings it to an end. Chung objects to a pretribulation rapture, appealing to Revelation 13:10 as evidence that the church must endure the tribulation; he argues that its reference to 'God's people' must refer to the church, not to 'the Jews', because Revelation was given 'for the churches' (Rev 22:16). Chung's argument is not watertight since it's easy to counter that the Bible refers to the Jewish people as 'God's people' and that their assemblies were also known as churches *(ekklēsiai);* moreover, adherents can argue that Revelation may have been written for those Jews who are 'left behind' after the rapture. I am not opposing Chung, but simply pointing out that his case needs further support. Similarly, Chung lacks a robust case against classical dispensationalism's belief in three future resurrections (at the start of the great tribulation; after it at the start of the millennium; and after the millennium).

6 Not presented by Chung, but refer to Rev 7:9-17, where the 'great tribulation' appears in verse 14.

In his 'critical engagement' section, Chung raises three objections to classical dispensational premillennialism. Firstly, he objects to the notion of divine favour on 'the Jews' throughout redemptive history—especially now that Paul has spelled out the equality of Jews and gentiles in Christ (citing Eph 2:14–18 and Gal 3:28). Countering that, I am not persuaded that Paul intended unity to indicate that the Jewish people's vocation has been revoked, nor that the one new humanity of Ephesians 2:15 is, as Chung claims, 'totally different from the current humanity' (p. 40). Moreover, he also finds replacement theology plausible, a notion I find unbiblical. Chung's second objection is closely related to the first: it relates to the peculiarity of Israel, especially concerning the literal fulfilment of prophecy in the millennium, including nationhood, the land promise, the temple and priestly services. Again, Chung's objection is too brief: just one sentence expressing the need to focus on the church (not the Jewish people) as central to God's redemptive work. While his point is important, he offers no alternative approach to interpreting relevant biblical prophecies. Thirdly, Chung rejects classical dispensational premillennialism because it holds to a pretribulational rapture; he doesn't attack the doctrine but simply notes that it has lost a lot of popularity in recent times.

In the historical review, Chung starts by noting that classical dispensational premillennialism is a revision of historic premillennialism, though with some significant differences.

In any case, he traces its development from John Nelson Darby (a founder of the Plymouth Brethren) in the nineteenth century, through a chain of proponents including his contemporary Dwight Moody (a leading evangelist in America's third Great Awakening), Cyrus Scofield (the reference Bible editor). Moving into the twentieth century, Chung continues with Arno Gaebelein (a Methodist biblical scholar, some of whose writings appear in readers on SATS courses), Lewis Sperry Chafer (founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, which thus became very influential for dispensationalism), John Walvoord (whose *The Rapture Question* I bought in the mid-1990s and was then persuaded by), Charles Ryrie (study Bible editor and publisher), John MacArthur (an influential Calvinist scholar and pastor over the past half century). The chapter's review also includes popular Christian writers Hal Lindsay, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, and church leaders of enormous influence in the far east, Watchman Nee (Chinese) and David Yonggi Cho (South Korean). Chung's list is longer, and his summaries provide a very valuable synopsis of the historical development and spread of classical dispensational premillennialism via influential leaders. The author's caution against reading biblical prophecy into current events is well-taken, especially in geographic locations that were entirely out of scope for the ancient prophets and their audiences. (I do not rule out literal fulfilment of prophecy in our times, but a lot of caution in doing so is warranted; headline news cannot drive an exegesis!)

Progressive dispensationalism

In chapter 3, Mathewson examines the eschatology of a different, contemporary, *progressive* form of dispensationalism. This model, led by Darrel Bock, Craig Blaising and Robert Saucy asserts that the biblical prophecies of a messianic kingdom were partly fulfilled during Jesus's earthly ministry; they continue in the present age through the church as his people, and will reach their ultimate fulfilment at the future return of Christ—a 'consummation' of creation in the form of the new heaven and new earth spoken of in Revelation 21–22. Thus, the fulfilment of the messianic era is not entirely in the future; it has begun and still continues to develop in stages until the new creation comes into being.

The hermeneutical principles of progressive dispensationalism, Mathewson explains, stress a 'unified redemptive plan' (p. 55) that includes physical, political, and spiritual dimensions for both Jews and gentiles in a single kingdom of God (not two separate kingdoms: physical and spiritual) that already enjoys partial fulfilment of the biblical kingdom prophecies.

Moreover, the church now fulfils those prophecies (seemingly in conjunction with Israel, if I read Mathewson correctly) and '[participates] in the same promises of salvation as the Jews' (p. 55). The author doesn't specify which Jews (i.e. Jews of which era) though I assume this unified scheme does not differentiate according to period, given that Paul's letter to the Roman assembly does not. In fact, Mathewson indicates that, unlike in classical dispensationalism, this model does not sharply distinguish between the church and Israel (at least in terms of God's unfolding redemption). Also attractive is the attention that progressive dispensationalism gives to the Davidic covenant, but here I find the author's explanation unclear. Apparently, the inclusion of both Israel and the church as God's people 'does not rule out a specific role for Israel in the future' (p. 55). However, the qualities of the complete fulfilment of kingdom prophecies appear to *require* such a role for Israel[7] and Mathewson's quotation (p. 56) of Blaising and Bock stresses *'the national and political dimensions of that [Davidic] promise'* (1993, italics original). The final hermeneutical advance made in progressive dispensationalism is the moderation of how literally the biblical text is interpreted; since prophecy and apocalypse are symbolic, they should be interpreted symbolically. That does not mean their reading does not produce anticipation of a *real* or *true* fulfilment it does! However, proper literary interpretation goes according to the genre of the literature in question, and progressive dispensationalism does better at this than its classical predecessor which seeks literal interpretation of symbolic writings.

7 Indeed, Paul *insists* that the descendants of Israel are 'dearly loved because of God's love for the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, since the gifts and vocation of God *cannot* be revoked' (Rom 11:28-29 my paraphrase).

Moving from hermeneutics to interpretation, Mathewson explains in some detail how progressive dispensationalism interprets OT prophecies and Revelation 20. He leans heavily on the work of the aforementioned leading proponents, essentially highlighting the key points of their work. Noteworthy is the anticipation of the messianic kingdom on earth, focused on Jerusalem *and its cult* (i.e. the temple and priestly services, including the sacrificial system). These religious practices are accompanied by the worldwide political reign of Christ from David's throne in Zion. The church is already part of that kingdom, currently realized even while Christ's reign is from heaven and the other earthly elements await his return.

The progressive dispensational model of the millennium, therefore, depends on a much larger portion of biblical text than scripture's only snippet that refers explicitly to the millennium, Revelation 20:4–6. Mathewson lists some of those familiar texts found in Ezekiel, Isaiah and Zechariah, as well as Paul's mention of a time of Christ's reign following the resurrection that will occur at his return until 'the end,' in 1 Corinthians 15:23–25. The theme of restoration is prominent and appealing.

Mathewson provides a summary of Saucy's rationale for a millennium, including the priority of Christ's validation on earth in history (not in another existence), the fulfilment of God's promises through Christ (earthly restoration being a key component) and to Israel (for which I would offer Jer 31:7 as an example: Israel is destined to become 'the chief of nations.') Mathewson continues with a brief critique of progressive dispensationalism's premillennial eschatology, raising several important points. Revelation 20:4–6, for instance, is vague about what the millennium looks like (what happens then?), or even where it is (on earth or in heaven?) He notes that the affirmations of Israel's restoration in the OT, and promises of kingdom blessings, are not found in the millennial text of Revelation (20:4–6), but *after* it, in Revelation 21:1–22:5. He disfavours the distinction between Jews and gentiles in the model's millennium (though it is less pronounced than in classical dispensationalism), apparently because the puzzle pieces don't necessarily have to be joined that way. Finally, the author asks why the millennial expectations can't simply be realized in 'the new creation of Revelation 21–22 [which] is *this creation* renewed, restored, and vindicated' not an 'eternal state … beyond history' (p. 68–69). Responses to Mathewson's objections must obviously be interrelated. While acknowledging the scant detail of Revelation 20:4–6, I would not be so quick to push the kingdom promises into the new creation, nor to downplay the need to sustain Jew–gentile distinction (vocationally, not soteriologically) throughout the millennium until the final judgment. Nevertheless, overcoming Mathewson's objections is no trivial task.

Thematic millennialism

In his chapter on thematic millennialism, Mathewson introduces quite a different interpretation of the millennium with some surprises.

Firstly, though thematic millennialism is like the three premillennial models discussed above in that it anticipates the Second Coming before the millennium, it is also unlike those models because it does not take the millennium as a literal time period between the return of Christ and the new creation (of Rev 21–22). Instead, the millennium of Revelation 20:4–6 is symbolic of key theological themes of that final biblical book. Mathewson presents this as his own eschatological outlook, and he is not alone. Prominent scholars such as Richard Bauckham, Gordon Fee and Craig Koester likewise subscribe to what Mathewson calls thematic millennialism.

First among the hermeneutical considerations presented is that of genre: symbols are fundamental to apocalypse and Revelation is full of symbolic imagery.

The idea is to create a picture that conveys the message instead of detailing it in literal terms, and Mathewson provides some good examples from the book of Revelation. This, then, raises the question of what the millennium as a symbol, not a time period represents. The author explains how numbers are used in Revelation and, most usefully for me, points out that the reference to three-and-a-half years 'says more about the *character* of the time' in which the church is battling than the length of that time (p. 72).

A second hermeneutical priority of this model is its attention to the immediate literary context of the millennial text, especially Revelation 19:11–22:5. Thematic millennialism is not beholden to fitting the millennium into a systematic theological doctrine nor into more ancient scriptures. It prefers to focus on the immediate context and ask the question: What is the *purpose* of the millennium *within* the apocalyptic vision recorded by John? At this point, Mathewson segues from hermeneutics into interpretation, using context as the lens for zooming in from the book of Revelation, to the literary section containing the millennium (Rev 19:11–22:5), to the events described in Revelation 20. Only then does he tease out the meaning of the millennium. The initial part of the review finds the millennium to be a divine answer to the theodicy question: if God is good and omnipotent, why do evil and suffering exist? By reference to the martyrs of Revelation 6:9–11 and 20:4, and more generally to God's suffering people, Mathewson presents the millennium as a symbol of their vindication and reward—still future yet guaranteed.

The large number used to denote the millennium is not a calibration of its literal duration but serves to contrast it to the 'short time' (Rev 12:12) of oppression of God's people (11:2–3; 12:6, 14; 13:5): the future benefit (of faithful perseverance in suffering) far outweighs its present cost. As a response to Revelation 12–13, the millennium promises a reversal in fortunes: the saints, who were slaughtered by Satan, are vindicated, while he is condemned. Mathewson then presents Revelation 19:11–22:5 as a set of visions that each tell the same story: what will take place when Christ returns. They are not, therefore, a series of events that follow one-another sequentially, but a collection of several different 'takes' on the same scene that of judgment of the enemies of God, and vindication plus reward of those who opposed them.

As the author concentrates on Revelation 20, some questions arise in my mind. The millennium appears in-between the two stages of Satan's defeat. Mathewson argues that the importance is not the temporal sequence, but the meaning of the imagery: to encourage those still suffering for Christ to persevere, whatever the consequences.

Point taken, but the chronology does not seem incidental; indeed, the millennium is precisely that blessed *time* when Satan is bound, when those who qualified for the first resurrection reign with Christ, *before* 'the rest of the dead … come to life' (Rev 20:5) and potentially face 'the second death' (v. 6). Mathewson's reference to other apocalyptic literature portraying a similar sequence of Satan's defeat (first imprisonment, then release, then judgment) is valuable but in no way undermines the reading of these as temporally sequential.[8] In places, Mathewson borrows from Fee and McKelvey, but they both concluded that the millennium must take place on earth (not in heaven), yet without providing details on what takes place. Mathewson seems to see this as a weakness to their conclusion; I submit that a post-supersessionist interpretation of Revelation 20 can encompass *both* proper reading of a text in its literary genre, taking symbols symbolically (which is key to Mathewson's case), *and* reading the events of that text chronologically. To support this symbolic-yet-chronological interpretation as a biblical possibility, I appeal to Pharaoh's dreams (Gen 41:17–31) and to Daniel's apocalypses (Dan 7–8). Finally, the dreams Joseph shared with his brothers (Gen 37:5–9) have the similar vagueness in time and location to the millennium in Revelation 20:4–6, yet the first dream (of the sheaves) has a chronology and both dreams are fulfilled on earth.

8 Like Mathewson, Walter Kaiser Jr (2011:153) reads the 'many days' of punishment of God's enemies in Isa 24:23 as a reference to the millennium, yet for Kaiser this *proves* the millennium is a future time period since it takes place 'on that [metaphorical] day' (Isa 24:21), which is the same as the day of the LORD.

So, the lack of detail on the millennium provided in Revelation does not disqualify it from possessing a temporal, this-earthly fulfilment any more than symbolism does.

Mathewson points out some literature that stresses the contrast between the millennium and the new earth, the latter being the ultimate goal and the locus of God's fulfilment of his promises, including prophetic texts about the messianic kingdom. For Mathewson, this is legitimate because the new earth is actually a renewed earth—a work of restoration described in Revelation 21:1 –22:5. So again, Revelation's sketch of the millennium does not need to be laden with expectations that belong in the new (renewed) earth.

Historic premillennialism in South Korea

In the fifth chapter of *Models of Premillennialism,* Chung discusses how historic premillennialism has developed in South Korea under leading figures (teachers, preachers and theologians) over the past century. Some of the historical developments have been influenced by teachings from abroad, initially through missionaries, while others emerged among South Korean preachers' own biblical interpretations and among those who studied in the West.

This chapter is valuable for Christian teachers working in South Korea, but since the key elements of the eschatological models considered are similar to those summarised above, I shall not review them here.

5. Final comments

Chung and Mathewson have produced a digestible review of premillennial eschatologies put forward since the second century, showing how each one developed and what its unique characteristics are. By restricting their scope to premillennialism, the authors avoided inundating the reader with too much information which is readily available elsewhere. I was particularly glad to discover that the majority view of evangelical theologians is premillennialism, where the impression I had was that it was a minority view among them (even if is evidently popular in the camp of dispensational laymen.) Even so, Chung and Mathewson are not polemical in their presentation, nor do they seek to persuade the reader to adopt any eschatological position.

Models of Premillennialism is not going to 'tick all the boxes' for all readers, even premillennialists. Both the brevity of the book and the separate authorship of each chapter make the compilation somewhat vulnerable. The book contains a considerable number of lengthy quotes, being more a review of models than new work. Indeed, the 'critical engagement' (especially of chapter 5) was more of a summary than a critique. I found some parts of the book repetitive and I had to wonder if the book was perhaps the product of a lecture series. Notwithstanding these factors, I would recommend the book for introductory reading in premillennial eschatology.

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