

Review: “The Return of Christ: A Premillennial Perspective”

The Return of Christ: A Premillennial Perspective, edited by David L. Allen & Steve W. Lemke, Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2011, pbk, 285 pp.

Following on the heels of their generally excellent *Whosoever Will* (reviewed [here](#)), Messrs Allen and Lemke have produced another collaborative effort for Southern Baptists and beyond. Although the previous book suffered a bit from two or three below par essays, it made up for its poor start with a number of quality contributions. When I purchased this book I expected the same sort of thing. I have to say that overall I was disappointed.

The editors tell us in their Introduction that, “The speakers at the Acts 1:11 Conference and the contributors to this volume all support a premillennial position with a pretribulational rapture.” They then express their hope “to present a scholarly version of that perspective for your prayerful consideration.” (6). If that was the writers’ intention then, despite a few exceptions, from this reviewer’s vantage point the book fails on both counts. It is not particularly scholarly and it does not present a coherent pretribulational premillennial perspective. There is no clear discussion of the rapture, and several of the writers seem unclear on what that position entails. Also, there are some strange omissions from the material. The most glaring one being no stand-alone chapter on “The Eschatology of the General Epistles and Revelation.” But we’ll get back to that. Let’s survey the twelve chapters:

Chapter One is a sermon by Jerry Vines. As per my opinion of his chapter in the previous book, these sorts of sermons do little for me. There’s not much solid meat to be found here, sad to say.

Ergun Caner kicks things off in earnest with his chapter entitled “The Patience of Hope,” subtitled, “Premillennialism and the Soon-Coming King.” The text given under this heading is 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, but the essay does not stick to that passage. I think “idiosyncratic” is the best word I could use to describe this chapter. In outlining “Six Millennial Options” the author differentiates pretrib premillennialism (32. Cf. 35, where he calls it “regular premillennialism,” in contrast with the “Historic” variety), which he wrongly equates with “chiliasm,” from dispensationalism, saying that “both premillennialists and dispensationalists have an identical event outline for the future, [but] they differ in history and hermeneutic.” (32). He does not explain this statement and I for one do not know why he thinks the two approaches – as defined by him – are separate.

At the top of the next page he claims that “Dispensationalism has become a fully orbed worldview.” Again there is nothing to back this rather extraordinary claim up. If there is such a thing as a “fully orbed” dispensational worldview I must have missed it. One of the main reasons for my being a “reluctant dispensationalist” is because of the dearth of worldview thinking among its major exponents.

Postmillennialists might have to take a second look at themselves as one half of them are supposedly looking “for the reestablishment of the [OT] monarchy as a result of worldwide

revival” (34), and evidently all amillennialism is synonymous with “covenant theology.” (35). The article picks up a bit with five reasons for the imminent return, but it is not a quality piece of eschatological writing.

Danny Akin’s chapter covers the Rapture, the *Bema* Seat and the Marriage Feast, and is a fine contribution, even if it does not address alternative views. It is enhanced by good charts. Then Paige Patterson addresses the subject of “Israel and the Great Tribulation.” Unusually for pretribulationists he places the casting down of Satan to earth in Rev. 12 at the time of Christ’s ascension (64-65). An editorial blip makes the 69 Weeks of Daniel 9 total 490 years (69), and he seems to favor lunar years rather than solar years, which Gleason Archer thought problematic.

David Allen’s topic is “The Millennial Reign of Christ” and is a decent presentation of some of the biblical data, but is not very enlightening. He thinks the sacrifices in Ezekiel’s Millennial Temple are only memorial (83), and does not care to interact with what in my view are the better alternatives of Hullinger and Whitcomb. To my way of thinking, the “memorial” option is a train that won’t run on a G-H hermeneutical track. The chapter on the final judgment by Richard Land is at about the same level but is annoyingly preachy to boot. It cannot be called “scholarly” by anyone’s book.

Junior Hill perpetuates the sermonic tone in a short but stirring piece on what the Church should be doing in anticipation of the Lord’s return. Then we enter Part Two of the book, which contains some additional studies on the eschatology. The lead-off is a sort of overview of “The Doctrine of Eschatology” by R. Stanton Norman. His understanding of the End Times is difficult to follow. If the editors had not assured us that all the contributors were pretribulationist I would never have guessed that was Norman’s position, and I still have my doubts. Influenced by G. E. Ladd (110 n.1; 123 n.17) Norman does not quote a single pretribulationist in his exposition of eschatology. The majority of his points come from historic or covenant premillennialists (Ladd, Grudem, Erickson, Moore). The essay suffers from all the inexactitude most dispensationalists associate with Ladd’s position. Norman’s paraphrase of Acts 1:6 as “Lord, when will You finish what you (sic) started” (122) about sums up the whole chapter. It is a rather poor effort.

How nice it was, then, to finally come across the substantive and transparent presentation of “The Kingdom that Comes with Jesus” by Craig Blaising. It is with this article that the standard reaches what one would hope to encounter from the book after reading the Introduction. This is one of the three really good articles in the book. Although the piece is only eighteen pages in length, it exudes the type of quality the subject of the book deserves. Blaising’s writing includes good use of exegesis and cross-referencing. He demonstrates the logical flow of this approach between the Testaments, while also managing a running critique of K. Riddlebarger’s amillennial alternative understandings. Special attention is paid to Revelation 20. Blaising achieves much in his short space.

Then comes the longest article, on “The Second Coming of the Messiah in the Old Testament” by Lamar E. Cooper. The style is not as pithy as Blaising’s, but the content is very solid. Cooper begins with a few pages of helpful background material showing that the Qumran community had a well developed doctrine of the suffering Messiah prior to setting up His earthly

kingdom. Before turning to the biblical material he notices how hardly any Old Testament theologies include teaching on the Second Coming (165-166). Cooper surveys many OT references to show the pervasiveness of the theme, especially in the Psalms and Prophets. Then he concentrates on the Book of Zechariah; returns to Qumran etc. for a discussion of proleptic (i.e. anticipatory) evidence for the Second coming, before ending with “Seven Signs of the Second Coming in the Old Testament” (198ff.).

The discussions are well done and are well worth time and study. There were one or two places where I disagreed. Can we assign Zechariah the burdensome tag “apocalyptic” (182)? Nowadays the most that scholars can agree upon regarding that term is that it applies only to Daniel and Revelation. And does Zephaniah 3:9 really refer to the reestablishment of the Hebrew language (201)? I don’t see it.

The high standard of the two foregoing essays is unfortunately not maintained in Steven Cox’s contribution. Writing on “The Eschatology of the Gospels” this piece reads like a first draft. He seems to be pre-trib (212?), but it is not always easy to follow his reasoning. Where, for example, does he put the Judgment of the “Sheep and the Goats” (220-223)? What does *he* think about the Rapture (226-227)? Also, is the reference to “the elect” in Matthew 24:22 to “those who are saved” (presumably through the new birth), or delivered physically? Instead of the two divergent opinions of Blomberg and Turner (212), couldn’t Matthew 24:31 better signify the truth that certain conclusions are obvious? Is Luke 16:22 (“Abraham’s side”) a reference to heaven (235)? And why spend four pages on John 8:21-47 (“The Lost Will Die in Their Sins”), while bypassing other more relevant eschatological passages (e.g. Matt. 13; Lk. 2 and 22; John 3:3-5)?

The author fills his essay with quotations from scores of sources, but most of them are superfluous and only add to the confusion. The scholars (mostly non-dispensational and post-tribulational) seem to be quoted for the sake of quoting them. This essay and those of Caner and Norman appear to have passed too quickly under the editors’ noses.

Michael Vlach can usually be relied upon to offer a clear and cogent argument and he does not disappoint in the closing essay on “The Eschatology of the Pauline Epistles” (perhaps now you see why I questioned the absence of a piece on the General Epistles and Revelation?). This, like Blaising’s essay, is a model of clarity and solid teaching. I was pleased to read Vlach’s belief that, “Christians are now living in the era of the new covenant” but “Israel in the future will also come under the blessings of the new covenant” (243). When will it dawn upon many dispensationalists that just because Jeremiah 31:31f. does not mention the Church (why would it?), Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 11 establishes a direct relationship of the Church to the new covenant? Anyway, the final essay closes off the book on a high. It is a shame Vlach didn’t have the space to comment more on the Thessalonian Epistles.

It is unfortunate that this review has to end on a negative note. *The Return of Christ* does contain some good entries (Akin, Allen, and especially Blaising, Cooper and Vlach), but there are too many low points to make this book successful in its stated aims, nor indeed worth the twenty-five dollar purchase price.