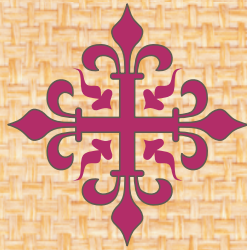


THE REFORMED ESCHATOLOGY OF
KIM RIDDLEBARGER



A JUDEO-CENTRIC CRITIQUE
BARRY HORNER

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In his recent volume, *A Case For Amillennialism*, this pastor of the Christian Reformed Church and visiting professor at Westminster Theological Seminary presents his eschatological scenario with a calm reasonableness, a comprehensiveness, and indeed a frankness, that is less evident in the writings of Boettner, Robertson, LaRondelle, and Waldron. We will confine our analysis to several areas that are either distinctive or particularly relate to the Premillennial regard for the ongoing and future role of national Israel according to God's covenant faithfulness. By way of introduction is the comment:

Sadly, when it comes to eschatology, a great deal of *ad hominem* argumentation goes on. For example, dispensationalists accuse amillennialists of being anti-Semitic, liberal, or of spiritualizing the Bible by not taking the Bible literally. Amillennialists accuse dispensationalists of being literalists who are prone to sensationalism. While we may have to agree or disagree, we would always strive to conclude this debate with charity and respect.¹

This writer, as a premillennialist, does believe that the historic stream of amillennialism has been and continues to be, in varying degrees, theologically anti-Judaic, even at times anti-Semitic. The facts of history speak for themselves, though he would firmly deny that the amillennialism Riddlebarger associates with is essentially liberal. Yet liberal and Roman Catholic Christians, using that designation broadly, are usually amillennial. He would also believe that the hermeneutic of amillennialism is fundamentally rooted in Hellenistic thought, in Clement, Origen, Jerome and Augustine, representing the school of Alexandria, and as such is inclined to be more allegorical and figurative in its interpretation. By way of contrast he believes that premillennialism is rooted more in Judaic thought, in Lucian, Diodorus, Theodore and Chrysostom representing the school of Antioch, and as such is more inclined to be consistently literal and straightforward. Hence, while premillennialists do insistently lay claim to literality as the fundamental, hermeneutical principle, and of course "literal" is the operative term here that must be carefully defined, this writer would sadly agree that some premillennialists are at times sensationalist, carnal, and even overly simplistic. However, reading the eschatology of Bonar, Ryle, and Spurgeon, will be a good corrective in this regard. Moreover, when all has been said and done, every school of eschatology has its perverse representations.

A. The distinctive Reformed representation.

From beginning to end, Riddlebarger is not only committed to historic Reformed eschatology in general. Given his *Christian Reformed Church* associations, this is not surprising. He is also passionately devoted to a more recent development technically

¹ Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, p. 13.

defined as “biblical theology” which has entered the Reformed stream and comprises a considerable part of the overall Reformation heritage. Thus:

My purpose is to set forth the historic Protestant understanding of the millennial age. This position is commonly known as *amillennialism* and is centered in the present reign of Jesus Christ. Amillennialism is grounded in *redemptive history*, the historical acts of God as they unfold in the Bible to provide for the salvation of his people. . . . I stand in the Dutch Reformed school and redemptive-historical trajectory of Geerhardus Vos, Herman Ridderbos, Anthony Hoekema, Cornelis Venema, and Meredith Kline.²

Hence it is immediately clear that, notwithstanding a much vaunted historic lineage, a more recent development has come to hold considerable sway, almost to the point of intoxication. This is not careless charge since Riddlebarger repeatedly employs terminology that incorporates the ideas of this school of “redemptive history,” involving over fifty-five explicit references. Certainly this emphasis, emanating from Geerhardus Vos of old Princeton Theological Seminary, could hardly be upheld as rooted in the centuries of Augustinian and Reformed theology. Indeed, the Lutheran stream has never drawn from this heritage, as is the case with regard to earlier systematic covenant theology.

B. The claim of historic lineage.

Numerous Reformed writers have been inclined to boast in the fact that their amillennial eschatology has a long-standing heritage going back to Augustine. They claim, and rightly so, that following the fourth century, subsequent centuries witnessed the overwhelming dominance of their essential prophetic perspective. Thus the illustrious, indeed God-blessed Reformation perpetuated this inherited eschatology, notwithstanding the fact that not only the gospel, but also to a lesser extent, the doctrine of the church, were subject to considerable, indeed radical change and apostolic recovery. No contemporary conservative Reformed writer seems to make this point more emphatically than Riddlebarger. He writes of amillennialism as “the historic Protestant understanding of the millennial age,”³ and in such a way that one is led to believe that to be Reformed in the fullest sense of that term is to be amillennial. Thus Augustinian eschatology, channeled through Luther, ought to be regarded as the traditional, historic scheme of prophecy, and implicit is Riddlebarger’s belief that the vagaries of premillennialism, earlier repudiated as carnal *chiliasm*, along with its dispensational subset, should yield to the more orthodox stream. Thus:

The Protestant orthodox also used the more polemical term *chiliasmus crassissimus*, “the grossest millennialism,” regarding those who stressed the earthly and Jewish elements of the millennial age, much like contemporary dispensationalists. Most Protestants regard

² Ibid. pp. 11, 31.

³ Ibid. p. 11.

chiliasm as incompatible with Reformation orthodoxy. This may come as a surprise to many American evangelicals, who assume that Bible-believing Christians throughout the centuries have held to premillennialism.⁴

For the believer of Reformed convictions, there is a strong allegiance to historical roots and continuity, especially insofar as connection with the historic Reformation is concerned, distinctively emanating from Wittenberg, Geneva and Westminster. So we further read:

First given systematic expression by Augustine in his famous *City of God*, amillennialism developed a distinctive Reformed emphasis. . . . Because amillennialism has its roots deep in historic Christianity, when it comes to comparing amillennialism with dispensationalism, clearly the burden of proof lies with dispensationalists to prove their case. Evangelicals often assume the opposite. It should also be noted that all major thinkers in Christian history have held something akin to the amillennial position (e.g. Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin). This does not mean that amillennialism is true simply because it has historical support within Catholic Christianity and historic Protestantism. Nevertheless this is an impressive point, which is often not considered.⁵

However, such claims call for a response that clearly exposes, not grounds for boasting, but rather the shameful legacy of historic amillennialism, the *achiliasmus crassissimus*, the grossest amillennialism which in reality has been the eschatology of Roman Catholicism for centuries. We read today, of writers such as LaRondelle, Chapman, Walker, and Palmer Robertson, that the Christian Church has, through inheritance, become the New Israel of God. Such language is nothing new according to Roman Catholicism. Consider the following:

1. "In fact, from the beginning of his ministry, the Lord Jesus instituted the Twelve as 'the seeds of the new Israel and the beginning of the sacred hierarchy.' [AG 5.]" *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Para. 877. (Second Vatican Council, 1992).
2. "As Israel according to the flesh which wandered in the desert was already called the Church of God (2 Esd. 13:1; cf. Num. 20:4; Deut. 23:1 ff.), so too, the new Israel, which advances in this present era in search of a future and permanent city (cf. Heb. 13:14), is called also the Church of Christ (cf. Mt. 16:18)." *Second Vatican Council*, Lumen Gentium, Chapter II, "The People of God," 1964.
3. "His [Jesus Christ's] intention in employing the term [*qahal*], hitherto used of the Hebrew people viewed as a church, to denote the society He Himself was establishing cannot be mistaken. It implied the claim that this society now constituted the true people of God, that the Old Covenant was passing away, and

⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵ Ibid., p. 32.

that He, the promised Messiah, was inaugurating a New Covenant with a New Israel.”

“Hebrew prophecy relates in almost equal proportions to the person and to the work of the Messiah. This work was conceived as consisting of the establishment of a kingdom, in which he was to reign over a regenerated Israel. The prophetic writings describe for us with precision many of the characteristics which were to distinguish that kingdom. Christ during His ministry affirmed not only that the prophecies relating to the Messiah were fulfilled in His own person, but also that the expected Messianic kingdom was none other than His Church.”

“In the Apostolic teaching the term *Church*, from the very first, takes the place of the expression *Kingdom of God* (Acts, V, 11). Where others than the Jews were concerned, the greater suitability of the former name is evident; for *Kingdom of God* had special reference to Jewish beliefs. But the change of title only emphasizes the social unity of the members. They are the new congregation of Israel -- the theocratic polity: they are the people (*laos*) of God (Acts, xv, 14; Rom., ix, 25; II Cor., vi, 16; I Peter, ii, 9 sq.; Heb., viii, 10; Apoc., xviii, 4; xxi, 3).” *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 1908, (Internet sourced).

However, since the time of Augustine, the amillennial doctrine of the supercession of national Israel by the Christian church, being beyond question a doctrine embraced by historic Christian orthodoxy as Riddlebarger asserts, has also resulted in the vilification of the Jewish people over the centuries. Participation by Reformed denominations and congregations in this shameful legacy, especially within Europe, is clearly evident, notwithstanding some notable exceptions. It is interesting to consider that more recently, while within the Roman Catholic Church there has been some sorrowful confession of this tragic heritage (refer to Callan, Carroll, Flannery, Hay, Mussner, and Remaud in *Future Israel* 361-377), those of conservative Reformed convictions have appeared to be reluctant to confront the ethical shame of their eschatological roots. Of course the Roman Catholic Church, notwithstanding *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II, in which anti-Semitism was denounced,⁶ nevertheless continues to maintain that it is the New Israel. Thus the dynamic of its problem has not been excised. So those of a Reformed persuasion are faced with the quandary of happily boasting in an Augustinian legacy that in fact has resulted in a shameful anti-Judaic, anti-Semitic heritage (FI 15-36). Of course alternatively they could recognize national

⁶ “True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (John 19:6); still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. . . . [T]he Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.” October 28, 1965. *Documents of Vatican II Council* (Internet sourced).

Israel in the present, after the manner of Paul Romans 11:28, which confession would then tend to lead to the embrace of the ongoing covenantal validity of the land, and a distinct glorious national future for the Jew within the one people of God. The further problem here would be that of turning away from theological tradition and embracing a more biblical eschatology that produces ethical fruit, especially in the realm of Jewish evangelism. This would be a vision which inescapably draws close to a premillennial perspective with regard to Israel, especially concerning the interpretation of passages such as Ezekiel 36-37 and Zechariah 12-14.

C. Exegetical considerations, particularly Romans 11.

In devoting a whole chapter to the question, “Is There a Future for Israel?”, there is right focus on the significance of Romans 11 where heavy reliance is placed upon the exegesis of Anthony Hoekema and Robert Strimple.⁷ To begin with, here is honest acknowledgment of a fundamental problem that amillennialism must confront.

There is no escaping the subject. Amillennarians must be prepared to answer the charge that it is so-called “suppressionist [supercessionist?]” or “replacement” theology which contends that Israel has been cut off, no longer elect and superceded by the church, that opens the door to modern anti-Semitism. The answer to these charges is found in Romans 11.⁸

The conclusion of the matter for Riddlebarger is that there is a future for *ethnic* Israel, though it is in fact a subtly reconstituted future. Certainly there is no indication here that the *ethnic* Jew has any divine claim upon a future *nationality* or *territory*. Thus Riddlebarger takes a position similar to that of Hoekema, John Murray, Strimple, and Vos, etc., whereby there will be a climactic saving of a large number of Jews of *perhaps* national dimensions, not simply the totality of the remnant (Rom. 11:5), toward the end of this age. However, there is careful qualification.

From an amillennial perspective, the future role of Israel in Romans 11 has little effect in determining one’s view of the millennium. But for dispensationalists [and premillennarians!], a future role for Israel and the continuity of the land promise is essential to an earthly kingdom which comes to function in a future millennial age. . . [T]he future salvation of Israel is not connected to a future millennial kingdom. It is connected to the end of the age. When all Israel is at hand, the resurrection is at hand.⁹

Presumably, there will then follow the homogenous kingdom of the eternal state in which past Jewish and Gentiles distinctiveness will have been eliminated through absorption into the Christian church and loss of individual Jewish identity. Hence, this

⁷ Robert B. Strimple, “Amillennialism,” *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock, pp. 81-129.

⁸ Riddlebarger, *Case for Amillennialism*, p. 183.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181, 194.

future saving of the Jews has individual, ethnic significance, according to token terminology, though there is great care not to suggest that there are any present or future national and territorial blessings in store for the Jews, according to divine, covenantal determination. Thus, “amillennarians believe that the formation of the nation of Israel in 1948 is not related to the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant but to God’s mysterious providential purposes for world history.”¹⁰ Perhaps a greater mystery here is the amillennialist’s rigid denial of what plainly stares him in the face concerning the Jew over centuries of history. Herein, once again, is the inherent weakness of this whole approach in which belief is confessed in a mere present emasculated Judaism. Hence, it ought not to surprise those who believe in this limited recognition if, in honestly witnessing to a Jew according to this perspective, their approach is quickly repudiated.

D. The amillennial response to theological anti-semitism.

Riddlebarger is to be commended for his readiness to deal with the charge of anti-Semitism that amillennialism faces as it is raised by dispensationalist Hal Lindsey, and even Reformed scholar David Holwerda in his *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* He writes that, “[my] purpose in this present study is to rectify this lamentable situation.”¹¹ However, in honestly admitting the reality of the problem, sad to say, there is really no attempt whatsoever by Riddlebarger to deal with the *reasons why* the charge of anti-semitism is raised. It is not enough to recapitulate Reformed eschatology merely for the sake of clarification. For instance, as a starter, why not consider the writings of Carroll, Cohn-Sherbok, Gruber, Hay, Littell, Mussner, Oberman, Parkes, Williamson, Wistrich, (FI 361-377)? Further, why not consider studying Acts and Romans and Galatians and Hebrews, not only according to recognized Reformed theologians, but also through a Hebrew-Christian lens as well? Recall the earlier challenging comment of John McRay, Professor of Old Testament and Archaeology at Wheaton College Graduate School, who, in the introduction to his significant volume, *Paul: His Life and Teaching*, wrote:

I have tried to ‘put on my first-century glasses,’ look at Paul in his Jewish and Hellenistic world of the Mediterranean, and see him not as a fourth-century church father, a sixteenth-century Protestant reformer, or a twenty-first century evangelical missionary, but as what he was, a first-century Jewish rabbi who accepted Jesus as his Messiah and became an ardent, dedicated Messianic Jew [emphasis added]. In this volume I have tried to emphasize that Paul was not the founder of Christianity, that he never ceased to be a Jew, and that Christianity is not a Gentile religion [emphasis added]. There has never been a greater advocate of the universal composition of the Christian faith than Paul, who emphatically asserted that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male not

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 243.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 32, 180-181, 183, 230.

female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). This means that when people place their trust in Jesus, neither Jews nor Gentiles have to abandon their ancestry, neither males nor females have to abandon their gender, and neither slaves nor free people have to abandon their sociological status. Paul's central focus in his preaching was that Gentiles do not have to become Jews any more than Jews have to become Gentiles, for as he went on to say, "If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29).¹²

So much of Riddlebarger's perspective, and indeed that of so many other Reformed authors, seem captive to Gentile exegesis, especially within the confines of a Reformed "tradition." Certainly this is the Augustinian, Constantian heritage that the Reformed mind seems locked up to. However, what has been the resultant ethical fruit of this eschatological heritage insofar as a kindly, compassionate witness of Gentile Christianity to the Jews is enjoined by Paul (Rom. 11:17-24)?

A concluding comment seems to suggest that this author is by no means convinced that his amillennial explanation has really dealt with the heart of the problem.

But even if the land promise of the Abrahamic covenant has already been fulfilled, nevertheless it is quite remarkable that the Jews have returned *en masse* to their ancient homeland. This is a fact which cannot be easily dismissed by amillenarians. Israel is a nation again. The Jews as a people are largely gathered together in one place. Amillenarians need to offer a cogent explanation for this amazing historical development, although we must be careful not to allow current events to determine our interpretation of a given biblical text. The answer to this problem was supplied for us by Paul in Romans 11.¹³

If the land promise has been fulfilled, then how is it possible for there to be bon fide "Jews" in the present? The author seems to sense a dilemma here, because of the evidence of history, that in fact his exegesis of Romans 11 has not answered. This is not so surprising when one considers that his study of this critical passage of the Word of God has given no thought to the vital truth of v. 28, namely that *national* Israel, apart from a saved Christian remnant, remains God's beloved enemy "for the sake of the fathers."



¹² John McRay, *Paul: His Life and Teaching*, pp. 11-12.

¹³ Riddlebarger, *Case for Amillennialism*, p. 244.