

# PLATONISM'S INFLUENCE ON CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY

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Much attention in recent years has been devoted to the influence of Greek philosophy on Christian doctrine. This has been especially true in regard to the nature and attributes of God. Some have also contended that Christian eschatology has been negatively influenced by Greek Platonic assumptions and ideas. Randy Alcorn's book, *Heaven*, for instance, asserts that biblical eschatology has been largely replaced by Christoplatonism which is a merger of Christianity and the ideas of Plato.<sup>1</sup> According to Alcorn, common conceptions of heaven are often influenced more by Platonic ideas than they are the Bible. In an interview with *Time*, N. T. Wright blamed Platonic influence on Christianity for a distortion of the doctrine of Heaven. "Greek-speaking Christians influenced by Plato saw our cosmos as shabby and misshapen and full of lies, and the idea was not to make it right, but to escape it and leave behind our material bodies,"<sup>2</sup> says Wright. In this article we will summarize what Platonism is and survey the impact of Platonism on Christian eschatology. This paper will end with a summary of observations concerning how Christians should view the relationship between Platonism and eschatology.

## PLATONISM AND NEO-PLATONISM

Platonism is rooted in the ideas of the great ancient Greek philosopher, Plato (427–347 B.C.). Plato was one of the first philosophers to argue that reality is primarily ideal or abstract. With his 'theory of forms,' he asserted that ultimate reality is not found in objects and concepts that we experience on earth. Instead, reality is found in 'forms' or 'ideas' that transcend our physical world. These forms operate as perfect universal templates for everything we experience in the world. For example, all horses on earth are imperfect replicas of the universal 'horseness' that exists in another dimension. One result of Platonism was the belief that matter is inferior to the spiritual. Thus, there is a dualism between matter and the immaterial.<sup>3</sup> This perspective naturally leads to negative

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<sup>1</sup> See Randy A. Alcorn, *Heaven* (Sandy, OR: Eternal Perspective Ministries, 2004). Alcorn devotes an Appendix to the topic, "Christoplatonism's False Assumptions," 475–82.

<sup>2</sup> David Van Biema, "Christians Wrong about Heaven, Says Bishop," *Time* [Online] February 7, 2008. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1710844,00.html>; accessed March 23, 2009. See also N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Diogenes Allen calls for balance on this point when he states, "Plato's view is by no means that of Genesis, but it is not the total rejection of the world by the Gnostics and Manichaeans. We should not confuse Plato's attitude to the physical universe, however much he stresses the need to transcend it and the body, with views which totally reject it, as superficial Christian writers so often do." Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 9.

perceptions concerning the nature of the physical world and even our human bodies. Plato's account of Socrates in *Phaedo* is one such example. When sentenced to death, Socrates rebuked his friends for mourning over him by declaring that he longed for death so he could escape his carnal body and focus on higher spiritual values in a spiritual realm.<sup>4</sup> For Plato (and Socrates), the human body is like a tomb for the soul. Plato's ideas have had an enormous impact. Gary Habermas observes that Plato's concept of forms, along with his cosmology and his views on the immortality of the soul, "probably has the greatest influence in the philosophy of religion."<sup>5</sup>

This exaltation of the spiritual over the physical in Platonism carried over to Judaism as evidenced in the writings of the Jew, Philo (20 B.C.–A.D. 50).<sup>6</sup> Philo, in an attempt to make the Old Testament more attractive to the Greeks influenced by the Platonic ideal, allegorized many Old Testament passages that appeared too crass and unworthy of God. For Philo, statements in the Old Testament that discussed the wrath of God or God changing his mind needed to be allegorized.

Platonism also influenced its more religious counterpart, Neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonism was a complex system for understanding reality that was founded by the Roman philosopher Plotinus (A.D. 204–270). The Egyptian-born Plotinus carried on some of the main ideas of Plato such as (1) there is an immaterial reality that exists apart from the physical world; (2) a strong distinction exists between an immaterial soul and the physical body; and (3) the immortal soul finds its ultimate fulfillment as it becomes one with an eternal, transcendent realm. According to Plotinus, the lowest level of reality is matter.<sup>7</sup> Thus, matter is viewed very negatively in Neo-Platonism. Plotinus himself held such disgust for physical things that he even despised his own body. To be consistent with his philosophy, Plotinus did not take care of his physical health or hygiene, much to the chagrin of his students with whom he was sometimes affectionate.

#### PLATONISM'S INFLUENCE ON EARLY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS

Many of the early Christians were not suspicious of or threatened by Plato. According to Diogenes Allen, Plato "astounded the Apologists and the early Church Fathers."<sup>8</sup> For instance, when early Christians encountered Plato's creation story in his

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<sup>4</sup> See, "Phaedo," in *Classics of Western Philosophy*, ed. Steven M Cahn (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 49–81.

<sup>5</sup> Gary R. Habermas, "Plato, Platonism," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 859.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 859-60.

<sup>7</sup> See Christopher Kirwan, "Plotinus," in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 689–90. According to Plotinus, the basis of all reality is an immaterial and indescribable reality called the One or the Good. There are several levels of reality that emanate from the One, much like ripples in a pond emanate from a dropped stone. The second level of reality is Mind or Intellect (*nous*). Mind results from the One's reflection upon itself. The level below Mind is Soul. Soul operates in time and space and is actually the creator of time and space. Soul looks in two directions—upward to Mind and downward to Nature, which created the physical world.

<sup>8</sup> Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 15.

*Timaeus*, some believed he had read Moses or received his insights from divine revelation.<sup>9</sup> The similarity of some of Plato's ideas with Christianity was seen as evidence why pagans should be open to Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

Platonic thinking influenced significant theologians of the early church. This was true for the Christians of the Eastern church, particularly those in the Alexandrian tradition such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen. As Jeffrey Burton Russell states, "The great Greek fathers of Alexandria, Clement and Origen, firmly grounded in Scripture, were also influenced by Platonism and Stoicism."<sup>11</sup>

Theologians of the Alexandrian tradition carried a high view of Greek philosophy and attempted to show that Christianity was consistent with the best of Greek philosophy. Viviano points out that Clement of Alexandria (150–215) followed in the footsteps of his predecessor Philo by adopting a "preference for an allegorical meaning of history which turns out, upon closer acquaintance, to transform much biblical history into general moral truths of a philosophical cast."<sup>12</sup> For Clement, God used philosophy to prepare the Greeks for Christ just like He used the law of Moses to prepare the Hebrew people for Christ. Clement held Socrates and Plato in high regard. He even believed that Plato served a role that was similar to that of Moses. In line with Greek philosophy, Clement viewed the body and matter as lesser in nature than the spirit (although he did not view the body as evil).

Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–254) was important in bringing Platonism into Christianity. As McGrath has observed, Origen "was a highly creative theologian with a strongly Platonist bent."<sup>13</sup> Viviano also points out that Origen "wrought some bold changes in Christian eschatology."<sup>14</sup> Origen "dissolved the Christian expectation of the resurrection of the body into the immortality of the soul, since Christian perfection consists, on this Platonizing view, in a progressive dematerialization."<sup>15</sup> He even went further than most of the early Christian theologians by asserting that "the resurrection body was purely spiritual."<sup>16</sup> Origen also understood kingdom texts in the Bible "in a purely spiritual, interior, private and realized sense."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 15. Christians denied Plato's view of the use of preexisting materials for creation. Christians asserted 'creation out of nothing.'

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 69.

<sup>12</sup> Benedict T. Viviano, O.P. *The Kingdom of God in History* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1988), 39.

<sup>13</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 33.

<sup>14</sup> Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History*, 39.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.

<sup>16</sup> McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History*, 41.

The influence of Platonic thinking was not just on theologians of the eastern tradition. Alister McGrath observes that Ambrose of Milan (c. 339–97) “drew upon the ideas of the Jewish Platonist writer, Philo of Alexandria” in promoting “a Platonic world of ideas and values, rather than a physical or geographical entity.”<sup>18</sup> Ambrose’s pupil, Augustine of Hippo, too, was influenced by Platonic thinking. Allen refers to Augustine as “one of the great Christian Platonists.”<sup>19</sup> According to Gary Habermas, “Christian thought also came under the influence of Platonism, as scholars of the third century such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen mixed this Greek philosophy with their theology. In particular, Augustine’s interpretation of Plato dominated Christian thought for the next thousand years after his death in the fifth century.”<sup>20</sup> In his *Confessions*, Augustine openly describes the help he received from the Platonists. Augustine was also influenced by neo-platonism as well. As Viviano states, “we need only note that Augustine was strongly influenced by neo-Platonic philosophy and has even read Plotinus and Prophyry . . . . This philosophy was highly spiritual and other-worldly, centered on the one and the eternal, treating the material and the historically contingent as inferior stages in the ascent of the soul to union with the one.”<sup>21</sup> Viviano summarizes the impact of Augustine’s Platonic thinking on the kingdom of God:

Thus Augustine was attracted to the spiritual interpretation of the kingdom we have already seen in Origen. Indeed, ultimately for Augustine, the kingdom of God consists in eternal life with God in heaven. That is the *civitas dei*, the city of God, as opposed to the *civitas terrena*.<sup>22</sup>

Augustine’s spiritual view of the kingdom contributed to his belief that the period of the church on earth is the thousand year reign of Christ. According to Viviano, “Augustine’s view would dominate and become the normal Roman Catholic view down to our own times.”<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to deny the importance of Platonic thinking. As Habermas points out, “Plato has exercised an enormous influence on Western thought and must therefore be dealt with by those of all philosophical persuasions.”<sup>24</sup> This influence also applies to the area of Christian eschatology.

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<sup>18</sup> McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*, 51.

<sup>19</sup> Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 82.

<sup>20</sup> Habermas, “Plato, Platonism,” 860. Allen states, “The Greek Fathers and Augustine drew most extensively on the philosophy of Plato and the Platonists.” 91.

<sup>21</sup> Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History*, 52.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 54. Daley points out that near the turn of the sixth century Aeneas of Gaza wrote the “first Christian work to challenge long-accepted Platonic assumptions. . .” Brian E. Daley, *S. J. The Hope of the Early Church* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 191. The Platonist doctrines that were challenged included reincarnation, the eternity of creation, and the preexistence of souls before their bodily existence. Daley points out that these views were “considered favorably as possibilities by Origen and Evagrius.”

<sup>24</sup> Habermas, “Plato, Platonism,” 860.

## TWO MODELS OF ESCHATOLOGY

### SPIRITUAL VISION MODEL

At this point, we shift specifically to the topic of Platonism and Christian eschatology. According to Craig Blaising, there have been two broad models of eternal life that have held by Christians since the time of the early church. The first he calls, the “spiritual vision model.”<sup>25</sup> This model is influenced by Platonism.<sup>26</sup> With this model, heaven is viewed primarily as a spiritual entity. Heaven is the highest level of ontological reality—the realm of spirit as opposed to base matter. “This is the destiny of the saved, who will exist in that nonearthly, spiritual place as spiritual beings engaged eternally in spiritual activity.”<sup>27</sup> The spiritual vision model, Blaising argues, is a combination of biblical themes and cultural ideas that were common to the classical philosophical tradition. The biblical themes the spiritual vision model draws upon include:

1. the promise that believers will see God.
2. the promise that believers will receive full knowledge.
3. the description of heaven as the dwelling place of God.
4. the description of heaven as the destiny of the believing dead prior to the resurrection.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the biblical themes, the spiritual vision model also drew upon cultural (Greek) ideas that were common to the classical philosophical tradition:

1. a basic contrast between spirit and matter.
2. an identification of spirit with mind or intellect.
3. a belief that eternal perfection entails the absence of change.<sup>29</sup>

According to Blaising, “Central to all three of these is the classical tradition’s notion of an ontological hierarchy in which spirit is located at the top of a descending order of being. Elemental matter occupies the lowest place.”<sup>30</sup> Heaven is realm of spirit as opposed to matter. Heaven is a nonearthly spiritual place for spiritual beings who are engaged only in spiritual activity. This heaven is also free from all change. Eternal life,

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<sup>25</sup> Craig A. Blaising, “Premillennialism” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 161.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 162. Snyder calls this approach “the kingdom as inner spiritual experience model.” “As a distinct model it may be traced to the influence of Platonist and Neoplatonist ideas on Christian thinking and especially to Origen” Howard A. Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1991), 42.

<sup>27</sup> Blaising, “Premillennialism,” 161.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

therefore, is viewed primarily as “cognitive, meditative, or contemplative.”<sup>31</sup> The spiritual vision model has led many Christians to view eternal life “as the *beatific vision* of God—an unbroken, unchanging contemplation of the infinite reality of God.”<sup>32</sup>

In his book, *Models of the Kingdom*, Howard A. Snyder points out that a purely spiritual view of the kingdom, which he calls “the kingdom as inner spiritual experience model,” “may be traced to the influence of Platonist and Neoplatonist ideas on Christian thinking. . . .”<sup>33</sup> According to Snyder this model “draws to some degree on Greek philosophical roots.”<sup>34</sup> He also states that “One can sense the Platonism lying behind this model.”<sup>35</sup> Snyder says: “Historically this model has often been tainted with a sort of Platonic disdain for things material, perhaps seeing the body or matter as evil or at least imperfect and imperfectible. It is thus dualistic, viewing the ‘higher’ spiritual world as essentially separate from the material world.”<sup>36</sup>

The spiritual vision model was inherently linked to allegorical and spiritual methods of interpretation that were opposed to literal interpretation based on historical-grammatical contexts. Blaising also notes that the spiritual vision model “was intimately connected with practices of ‘spiritual interpretation’ that were openly acknowledged to be contrary to the literal meaning of the words being interpreted.”<sup>37</sup> “The long term practice of reading Scripture in this way so conditioned the Christian mind that by the late Middle Ages, the spiritual vision model had become an accepted fact of the Christian worldview.”<sup>38</sup>

## NEW CREATION MODEL

In contrast to the spiritual vision model, the second model Blaising discusses is the “new creation model.” This model is contrary to Platonism and the spiritual vision model and emphasizes the physical, social, political, and geographical aspects of eternal life. It emphasizes a coming new earth, the renewal of life on this new earth, bodily resurrection, and social and political interactions among the redeemed.<sup>39</sup> As he states, “The new creation model expects that the ontological order and scope of eternal life is essentially continuous with that of present earthly life except for the absence of sin and death.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, eternal life is embodied life on earth. This approach “does not reject

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<sup>31</sup> Blaising, “Premillennialism,” 162.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 42.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>37</sup> Blaising, “Premillennialism,” 165.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

physicality or materiality, but affirms them as essential both to a holistic anthropology and to the biblical idea of a redeemed creation.”<sup>41</sup> This approach, according to Blaising, follows the language of passages like Isaiah 25, 65, 66; Revelation 21; and Romans 8 which speak of a regenerated earth. A new creation model emphasizes the future relevance of matters such as renewal of the world and universe, nations, kings, economics, agriculture, and social-political issues. In sum, a new creation model operates on the belief that life in the future kingdom of God is largely similar to God’s purposes for the creation before the fall of Adam, which certainly involved more than just a spiritual element. Thus, the final Heaven is not an ethereal spiritual presence in the sky. As Russell D. Moore points out, “The point of the gospel is not that we would go to heaven when we die. Instead, it is that heaven will come down, transforming and renewing the earth and the entire universe.”<sup>42</sup> Far from being only a spiritual entity, the eternal destiny of the redeemed includes a holistic renewal of human existence and our environment:

The picture then is not of an eschatological flight from creation but the restoration and redemption of creation with all that entails: table fellowship, community, culture, economics, agriculture and animal husbandry, art, architecture, worship—in short, *life* and that abundantly.<sup>43</sup>

The new creation model appears to have been the primary approach of the church of the late first and early second centuries A.D. It was found in apocalyptic and rabbinic Judaism and in second century Christian writers such as Irenaeus of Lyons.<sup>44</sup> But, as Blaising asserts, the spiritual vision model would take over and become “the dominant view of eternal life from roughly the third century to the early modern period.”<sup>45</sup>

### IMPACT OF PLATONISM ON ESCHATOLOGY

Randy Alcorn has specifically addressed the impact of Platonism on Christian eschatology. In doing so he has coined the term, *Christoplatonism*. As the title suggests, Christoplatonism is a philosophy that “has blended elements of Platonism with Christianity.”<sup>46</sup> But as he points out, this merger is not a good thing since this mixture of Platonism with Christianity “has poisoned Christianity and blunted its distinct differences from Eastern religions.”<sup>47</sup> According to Alcorn, Christoplatonism’s pervasive influence

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<sup>41</sup> Blaising, “Premillennialism,” 162.

<sup>42</sup> Russell D. Moore, “Personal and Cosmic Eschatology,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 912.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 859.

<sup>44</sup> Blaising, “Premillennialism,” 164.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Alcorn, *Heaven*, 475.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

has caused many Christians to resist the following biblical truths: bodily resurrection of the dead; life on the New Earth; eating and drinking in Heaven; walking and talking in Heaven; living in dwelling places; traveling down streets; going through gates from one place to another; ruling; working; playing; and engaging in earthly culture.<sup>48</sup>

Christoplatonism is also evident when the following beliefs are held:

1. Belief that our eternal dwelling place is in a spiritual dimension and not on earth.
2. Belief that planet earth is basically evil and is beyond restoration.
3. Belief that heaven is entirely beyond human comprehension.
4. Belief that our experience in eternity will be mostly that of spiritual contemplation and inactivity.
5. Belief that there is no time or linear progression of history.
6. Belief that there will be no nations or governments.

Alcorn believes that Christoplatonism has had “a devastating effect on our ability to understand what Scripture says about Heaven, particularly about the eternal Heaven, the New Earth.”<sup>49</sup> He cites a statistic from *Time* to support this in which two-thirds of Americans who believe in resurrection of the dead do not believe they will have resurrected bodies.<sup>50</sup>

According to Alcorn, prevailing ideas of Platonism imposed on eschatology rob Christians of their hope. “The human heart cries out for answers about the afterlife,” but the answers are not being given, he claims.<sup>51</sup> Many Christians are led to believe, as John Eldredge has pointed out, that “eternity is an unending church service,” a “never-ending sing-along in the sky.”<sup>52</sup> Trying to long for an eternity that is primarily spiritual does not offer real hope. Alcorn states, “Trying to develop an appetite for a disembodied existence in a non-physical Heaven is like trying to develop an appetite for gravel. No matter how sincere we are, and no matter how hard we try, it’s not going to work. Nor should it.”<sup>53</sup>

Alcorn claims that this misunderstanding about the nature of Heaven has its roots in Satan. “Satan need not convince us that Heaven doesn’t exist. He need only convince us that Heaven is a place of boring, unearthly existence. If we believe that lie, we’ll be robbed of our joy and anticipation.”<sup>54</sup> Alcorn mentions that in his research he collected more than 150 books on Heaven, both old and new. “One thing I’ve found is that books about Heaven are notorious for saying we can’t know what Heaven is like, but it will be

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<sup>48</sup> Alcorn, *Heaven*, 476.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>52</sup> John Eldredge, *The Journey of Desire: Searching for the Life We’ve Only Dreamed of* (Nashville: Nelson, 2000), 111.

<sup>53</sup> Alcorn, *Heaven*, 7.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

more wonderful than we can imagine,” he says.<sup>55</sup> “However, the moment we say that we can’t imagine Heaven, we dump cold water on all that God has revealed to us about our eternal home. If we can’t envision it, we can’t look forward to it. If Heaven is unimaginable, why even try?”<sup>56</sup>

#### PLATONISM AND MILLENNIAL VIEWS

How does discussion concerning Platonism’s influence on Christian eschatology relate to the millennial views of premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism? Is there an inherent connection between Platonism and a specific millennial view(s)? Is premillennialism inherently in accord with a new creation model while amillennialism and postmillennialism are intrinsically linked to the spiritual vision model?

These issues were directly brought up by Craig Blaising in his section, “Premillennialism” in the book, *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*.<sup>57</sup> Here Blaising specifically argued that non-premillennial views influenced by Augustine are heavily reliant on the spiritual vision model while premillennialism is more consistent with the new creation model. Blaising argues that a Platonic, spiritual vision model approach led to a rejection of the idea of an earthly kingdom:

Ancient Christian premillennialism weakened to the point of disappearance when the spiritual vision model of eternity became dominant in the church. A future kingdom on earth simply did not fit well in an eschatology that stressed personal ascent to a spiritual realm.<sup>58</sup>

Blaising claims that spiritual vision model presuppositions were behind Augustine’s turning from premillennialism to amillennialism and the view that the millennium of Revelation 20:1-10 is being fulfilled spiritually through the institutional church in the present age.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, premillennialism thrives in an environment in which the new creation model and a more literal approach to Scripture are emphasized. As a result, kingdom promises are taken more literally and the physical dimensions of the kingdom are emphasized.

Robert E. Strimple, a representative of amillennialism in the same book, *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, disagrees with Blaising that amillennialism is inherently linked to the spiritual vision model. He also challenges Blaising’s idea that premillennialism is necessarily linked to the new creation model. In his response to Blaising, Strimple asks, “What evidence does he [Blaising] offer, for example, to support

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<sup>55</sup> Alcorn, *Heaven*, 17.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>57</sup> Blaising, “Premillennialism” 170–74.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-74.

the alleged link between early amillennial thought and Greek philosophical dualism?”<sup>60</sup> Strimple says, “no evidence is offered to support the idea that such a bias is present in *modern* amillennialism.”<sup>61</sup> He also declares: “When we read modern amillennialists themselves, do we find them expressing a purely ‘spiritual’ (i.e. nonphysical) eschatological hope? Not at all.”<sup>62</sup> He then lists a series of amillennial theologians who believe in a “more earth-oriented vision” of eschatology including Herman Bavinck, Geerhardus Vos, Anthony Hoekema, and Greg K. Beale.<sup>63</sup>

Strimple then offers a second response to Blaising in claiming that earlier dispensational premillennialists like Darby, Scofield, and Chafer often drew heavily upon the spiritual vision model, as even Blaising admits. Thus, “the fact remains that historically the link between the new creation model and premillennialism has not been as clear and strong as his thesis implies.”<sup>64</sup> As the above quotations show, the issue of the millennium and models of Christian eschatology is one in which there is some disagreement. We will return to this topic in the observations made below.

### OBSERVATIONS

So far this article has focused on some current thinking regarding Platonism and its relationship to Christian eschatology. At this point this author will make some observations on this topic of Platonism and Christian eschatology. These observations are drawn partly from the research mentioned above and from opinions and insights that this author has come to from his research on this topic.

*First, from a historical perspective, it appears that the church in its earliest years held a view of eschatology consistent with the new creation model, but it was not long before the church shifted to the spiritual vision approach.* As Snyder observes, the earliest Christians viewed the kingdom of God primarily as a future hope. The kingdom is “pointed beyond this life to something more ultimate and complete—not mere spiritual survival only but a final cosmic reconciliation.”<sup>65</sup> This future kingdom was viewed as “final cosmic reconciliation itself or as a millennial reign preceding the ultimate summation of all things.”<sup>66</sup> The primary image for these Christians was “a new heaven and a new earth.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Strimple, “An Amillennial Response to Craig A. Blaising,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 257.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 258-59.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 259–60.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>65</sup> Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 25.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

The coming of this anticipated kingdom for the early Christians was not just the end of history or the giving of rewards—it was “a cosmic reconciliation” and “a final settling of the score regarding all evils and injustices of history.”<sup>68</sup> The eschatology of the early church involved a “new creation” and something “greater or more glorious than the state of the cosmos before the Fall.”<sup>69</sup> This eschatology was also largely pessimistic about the fallen and ruined world that could only be redeemed by the second coming of Christ.<sup>70</sup>

This new creation approach of the earliest Christians soon changed, though. According to Benedict T. Viviano, as the Gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire the hope of Christian eschatology changed: “The main loss was of the apocalyptic dimension of Christian hope. The dual hope of the Christian, the kingdom of God and resurrection of the dead, (or at least of the saints), was reduced to the resurrection of the individual to eternal life in heaven. The social and the this worldly historical dimensions of hope were lost.”<sup>71</sup> This was largely due to the “Hellenistic philosophical mind” that “was primarily interested in the universal, the necessary, the eternal” and “Plato’s mathematical bias.”<sup>72</sup> As a result, a specific purpose for history was undermined.

*Second, the shift to a spiritual vision approach to eschatology is tied largely to Platonic influence.* As discussed above, Platonic assumptions clearly influenced early Christian leaders such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine. It appears that Platonic and Neo-Platonic influences steered many Christians from a literal understanding of Bible passages in the attempt to make Christianity more acceptable to the Greek mind. Thus, we believe it is valid to conclude that Platonism has affected how many Christians viewed eschatology.

In making this observation, though, one point of clarification is necessary. The influence of Platonism on Christian eschatology was partial and not entire. With the possible exception of Origen, the theologians of the Alexandrian tradition and Augustine still looked for the resurrection of the body. Thus, while there may have been a heavy emphasis on a spiritualized view of the kingdom this did not rule out entirely the hope for resurrection or even the triumph of Christ over the earth. McGrath points out that Augustine’s concept of Heaven “involves the restoration of the conditions of this earthly paradise.”<sup>73</sup>

*Third, while Platonism was a major factor in the acceptance of the spiritual vision model, various Scripture passages were also used to support this spiritual vision approach.* Snyder points out that the following verses were emphasized:

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<sup>68</sup> Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 26.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History*, 38.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*, 52.

- Luke 17:21: “The kingdom of God is within you.”
- Romans 14:17: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.
- 1 Corinthians 15:50: “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.”
- 2 Peter 1:4: “partakers in the divine nature.”
- Colossians 1:27: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27).<sup>74</sup>

With a spiritual approach to the kingdom, according to Synder, “the true participants in the kingdom are those Christians who go on to perfection in their inner experience of God. The final goal of the kingdom is absorption of all things into God.”<sup>75</sup> It is also asserted that “this model may be associated with the early rise of Monasticism in the East and especially with the Desert Fathers, such as Anthony (c. 251–356) and Macarius the Egyptian (c. 300–390).”<sup>76</sup>

*Fourth, the spiritual vision model has been the predominant view throughout church history.* As Viviano and Snyder have documented, the apocalyptic and physically-oriented view of the kingdom was held by the early church, but this approach was followed by more spiritual understandings of the kingdom of God. This clearly was the case from the third century through the Middle Ages and up to the Reformation and beyond. According to Viviano, the people of the Middle Ages, “did not understand well the this-worldly future dimension of the kingdom of God” because of its “acute Platonizing longing for the eternal, for a place outside of time and history.”<sup>77</sup> What was dominant during the Middle Ages was “the Augustinian transformation of the kingdom into the church. . . and. . . the imperial theology of the Christian empire as the kingdom of God on earth.”<sup>78</sup> Viviano points to Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, and Albert of Cologne as promoters of this view. Albert, in particular relies heavily upon Plato for eschatology. As Viviano states, “His path was one of Platonizing Christian spirituality which identified the kingdom with God himself.”<sup>79</sup> The failure of medieval theology to integrate a this-worldly eschatology “is one of its major weaknesses.”<sup>80</sup>

*Fifth, the Reformation Period reopened the door to more serious contemplation of the new creation model.* Blaising argues that Reformation “presented a systemic challenge to the medieval consensus of Christian thought” with implications for

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<sup>74</sup> Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 41.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>77</sup> Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History*, 57. Viviano also suggests ignorance of Jewish apocalyptic and the Augustinian transformation of the kingdom into the church as reasons for a spiritualized eschatology in this age.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History*, 76.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

eschatology.<sup>81</sup> “Although the Reformers themselves did not directly challenge the spiritual vision model, they did unleash powerful currents of thought that led to both the reemergence of new creation eschatology and the consideration of millennialism.”<sup>82</sup> This is due to the Reformers rejection of allegorical interpretation and more emphasis on “the historical nature of human life.”<sup>83</sup>

*Sixth, the new creation model is not the sole possession of any millennial view.* This point is admittedly controversial and a nuanced answer here is needed. As mentioned earlier, Blaising made much of the argument that amillennialism is closely tied to the spiritual vision model while premillennialism is closely linked with the new creation model. Strimple strongly challenged Blaising assertions on this matter.

There are elements of truth in what both Blaising and Strimple are asserting. It is difficult to deny that Platonism and a spiritual vision model approach were influential in the church’s shift from premillennialism to amillennialism. Thus, in our view Blaising is correct that the rise of amillennialism coincided with the acceptance of the spiritual vision model. Plus, it is difficult to deny that amillennialism has often overwhelmingly emphasized the spiritual dimensions of the kingdom. Thus, in our view, it is not invalid to connect amillennialism (especially older amillennialism) with a spiritual vision approach.

Yet, Strimple makes a valid point when he asserts that amillennialists have traditionally held to a literal second coming of Jesus followed by a bodily resurrection and an historical eternal state.<sup>84</sup> Plus, we think Strimple is correct when he points out that modern amillennialists are now stressing a restored created order in the eternal state.<sup>85</sup> As Anthony Hoekema, an amillennialist has stated, “The Bible assures us that God will create a new earth on which we shall live to God’s praise in glorified, resurrected bodies.”<sup>86</sup> For Hoekema this new earth includes “contributions of each nation to the life of the present earth” and “the best products of culture and art.”<sup>87</sup> In his book, *A Case for Amillennialism*, Riddlebarger offers roughly one page to the topic of “Cosmic Renewal.”<sup>88</sup> In our opinion, recent amillennialists like Hoekema and Riddlebarger have been more clear than their ancestors in emphasizing the physical aspects of eschatology. Whether amillennialists are consistent in holding to a new creation model while also affirming amillennialism is another issue. Yet since amillennialists openly affirm a new

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<sup>81</sup> Blaising, “Premillennialism,” 174.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>84</sup> Strimple, “An Amillennial Response to Craig A. Blaising,” 257–59.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>86</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 274.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>88</sup> Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 137-38.

creation model or cosmic renewal view, it cannot be said that a new creation model is the sole possession of premillennialism.

Others affirm this finding. Snyder has argued that a “Future Kingdom” (or new creation) model of eschatology is not the sole possession of premillennialism. As he states, “It would be misleading, however, to think of the Future Kingdom model as necessarily implying millennialism, for there can be millennial and non-millennial views of the kingdom as future hope.”<sup>89</sup> Yet we would also affirm that, in general, the new creation model is more consistent with premillennialism. As Snyder states, “Of the various millennial views, however, premillennialism seems best to fit the Future Kingdom model because of its insistence that the kingdom cannot come in fullness until the cataclysmic event of the Second Coming.”<sup>90</sup> To summarize, one can be an amillennialist and hold to some form of a new creation model, yet premillennialism, in general, appears to have a closer connection to the new creation model. Thus, in our view, premillennialism is more consistent with a new creation model.

Randy Alcorn, who has launched the most direct attack on Platonic influence on Christian eschatology, does not believe that the rejection of Christoplatonism must make one a premillennialist. As he states, “our beliefs about the Millennium need not affect our view of the New Earth.”<sup>91</sup> “Hence, no matter how differently we may view the Millennium, we can still embrace a common theology of the New Earth.”<sup>92</sup>

*Seventh, Christian leaders should do more to teach their people about their coming eternal home and dispel myths about Heaven that are not biblical.* This author agrees with Alcorn that the hope of Heaven has often been hijacked by Platonic assumptions. Far too many Christians assume that their existence in eternity will mostly be that of a spiritual entity in a non-spiritual realm. God intentionally made humans as a complex unity of the material (body) and non-material (spirit). Humans can no more long for a purely spiritual existence than a fish could long to live only on land. It is this author’s belief that instruction on our eternal home will bring even more hope to the people of God.

*Eighth, much work needs to be done in thinking through the theological implications of a new creation model.* With a few exceptions, not much has been written on the implications of a new creation model of eternity. This may partly be because Christians are often hesitant to speculate on what eternity will look like. But we think there are important theological implications of a new creation model that need to be worked out.

For example, what does a consistent new creation model mean for traditional amillennialism and covenant theology? A new creation model is very physical,<sup>93</sup> but

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<sup>89</sup> Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 35.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Alcorn, *Heaven*, 146.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. Alcorn himself is a premillennialist.

<sup>93</sup> We are not saying the new earth is only physical. There is a spiritual element. This is a both/and scenario.

amillennialism and covenant theology have often heavily emphasized a spiritual eschatology in which physical and national entities have been “Christified” and/or “typified.” According to Strimple, the concepts of the land of Canaan, the city of Jerusalem, the temple, the sacrifices, the throne of David, and even the people of Israel, were all “typological images” that found fulfillment in Jesus Christ.<sup>94</sup> Now that the reality—Jesus Christ—has been introduced, “the shadow passes away” never to be restored again.<sup>95</sup> Waltke, too, asserts that many Old Testament symbols have found a spiritual fulfillment in Christ:

With the transformation of Christ’s body from an earthly physical body to a heavenly spiritual body, and with his ascension from the earthly realism to the heavenly Jerusalem with its heavenly throne and the outpouring of his Holy Spirit, the earthly material symbols were done away and the spiritual reality portrayed by the symbols superseded the shadows.<sup>96</sup>

However, can such a heavy spiritualization of eschatological themes remain under a new creation model approach? Waltke claims that “the kingdom’s character is ‘heavenly’ and ‘spiritual,’ not ‘earthly’ and ‘political.’”<sup>97</sup> But can such a statement be reconciled with a new creation model? Does not this statement reveal a false dichotomy that smacks more of Platonism than biblical truth? Strimple claims that amillennialism is consistent with the idea of a restored creation,<sup>98</sup> but is this assertion consistent with his previous declarations that matters like land and Israel are transcended by greater spiritual realities in the New Testament?<sup>99</sup> How can amillennialists consistently believe in a coming physical new earth while also holding that the eschatological hope of the Old Testament has been transcended in spiritual and typological ways? Much of the biblical data that discusses physical aspects of the coming kingdom is found in the Old Testament. Plus, it should be remembered that new creation model passages like Revelation 21 and 22 rely much on Old Testament passages like Isaiah 60, 65, and 66. In our view, it appears that New Testament eschatology often assumes and relies upon Old Testament eschatology more so than it transcends it.<sup>100</sup>

To be clear, amillennialists like Hoekema and Riddlebarger have affirmed a cosmic renewal idea that has much in common with a new creation model. This is not in dispute. But in doing so are they being inherently contradictory? Also, are their views consistent with those of older amillennialists who heavily emphasized a spiritualized eschatology?

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<sup>94</sup> Strimple, “Amillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 85.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>96</sup> Bruce Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Testaments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 282.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>98</sup> Strimple, “Amillennialism,” 259.

<sup>99</sup> See *Ibid.*, 85–86.

<sup>100</sup> The prophecies of Daniel 9 appear literally referred to in Matthew 24:15–21 and 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4.

Another issue needs to be addressed. For amillennialists and covenant theologians who affirm some form of cosmic renewal or new creation model, what does this mean for their view of nations in general and Israel as a nation in particular? A new creation model emphasizes the continuing importance of nations and kings into the eternal state (see Rev. 21:24). The mention of “kings” shows that the concept of “nations” includes more than just the general idea of saved people.<sup>101</sup> These are literal nations with specific geographic boundaries. As an amillennialist, Hoekema stated that there will be multiple nations (“each nation”<sup>102</sup>) on the new earth. But if one recognizes that there are nations in eternity with specific roles and identities, why couldn’t there be a special role and identity for the nation Israel? If we grant that nations exist in God’s future plans, then why should we have a problem with Israel having a special role in the future? In response to Hoekema’s declaration concerning the presence of nations and culture on the new earth, Barry Horner points out that “the mention of distinctive national contributions . . . would surely have to include the cultural benefactions of Israel!”<sup>103</sup> Horner’s point is well taken. If there are nations on the new earth, why would Israel not be one of these nations contributing to the new order? Plus, it does not appear that God’s purpose is to make every believer a part of Israel as amillennialists and covenant theologians often claim. The presence of nations (plural) argues against the idea that God’s intent is to make everybody “Israel.”

Premillennialists have issues to address as well. It appears that premillennialists often stress a new creation approach to the coming earthly millennium, but often they appear to drift toward a spiritual vision approach to the eternal state or refuse to specifically address the eternal state. Very few, if any, books from a premillennial or dispensational premillennial viewpoint actually address the eternal state with much depth. There is very little discussion of the social, political, economic, agricultural, geographical, and other physical dimensions of the eternal state. For example, in his fine work, *Systematic Theology*,<sup>104</sup> Robert Duncan Culver spends 1156 pages addressing all the major categories of theology, but devotes just three pages to his final chapter, “The Future Eternal State.”<sup>105</sup> Culver states, “I find myself now, after a long life of reflecting on the biblical materials, very reluctant to say much about the eternity to come. It seems presumptuous to do so.”<sup>106</sup> Culver’s approach appears typical of many works from a premillennial perspective, and one must appreciate his humility in not speaking on matters of which he is not comfortable. But as Alcorn’s 492-page treatise on Heaven and

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<sup>101</sup> Like Rev. 21:24, Rev. 19:19 mentions “kings of the earth” in regard to “armies assembled.” These are armies in which kings of nations are the rulers.

<sup>102</sup> Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 286.

<sup>103</sup> Barry E. Horner, *Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must Be Challenged* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), 217.

<sup>104</sup> Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2005).

<sup>105</sup> Culver, *Systematic Theology*, 1153–56.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 1154.

eternity indicates, there is much to discuss about eternity.<sup>107</sup> In addition to Revelation 21–22, there are passages such as Isaiah 60–66 which appear to have major implications for the eternal state. Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22 make specific mention of the coming “new heavens and a new earth.” Plus, Revelation 21–22 relies heavily on Isaiah 60–66. In our view, there is significant material for study on the eternal state.

Also, it would be helpful to see premillennialists do more to harmonize the references to the new heavens and new earth in Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22 with their New Testament counterparts in 2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1. The reference to new heavens and new earth in Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22 appear to refer to millennial conditions since there is a presence of the curse, sin, death, and childbirth (65:20–23). But Revelation 21:1 appears to place the “new heaven and new earth” after the millennium of Revelation 20 in an era in which there is no longer any curse (Rev. 22:3). Premillennialists, thus, need to address whether the millennium is part of the new heavens and new earth, perhaps a ‘phase one’ of the new earth. Plus they need to address the continuities and discontinuities between the millennium and the eternal state.

Another issue that needs more study is the timing of the burning up of the heavens and earth as described in 2 Peter 3:10–12. The traditional view is that this event takes place after the millennium in preparation for the eternal state. But if the millennium is included in the “restoration of all things” (Acts 3:21), and is part of what the groaning creation has been longing for (see Rom. 8:18–23) why would God destroy the earth that is currently being renovated and renewed? Both views of a destruction *before* the millennium and a destruction *after* the millennium have their strengths and weaknesses, but it would be good to see more attention given to this matter. In addition, work needs to be done on whether the coming new earth is a renewal of the present planet or an entirely new earth.<sup>108</sup>

Clearly, there is a need for much further study of the new creation model and its implications. But as we conclude, there is one final point to be made on this issue. For many Christians, eschatology has often become a difficult and confusing issue. While many are perplexed or turned off by debates over the millennium and the rapture, the topic of the eternal state is one which all Bible believing Christians should be able to agree and rally upon. Let the debates concerning eschatological issues rightly continue, but as we debate these important issues, let us not neglect the hope of our future eternal home. Regardless of one’s rapture or millennial view, there should be agreement that our final home will be on a restored earth in which righteousness dwells and our fellowship is with our God and the people who love Him. “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20).

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<sup>107</sup> Whether one agrees or disagrees with Alcorn’s views, Alcorn has shown that information concerning the new earth is not as scant as many have been led to believe.

<sup>108</sup> For a helpful discussion of this issue see Douglas J. Moo, *2 Peter, Jude* in *The NIV Application Commentary*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 196–205).