

A SURVEY OF EARLY PREMILLENNIALISM

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The last two centuries have witnessed intensified study in the eschatological portions of the Bible. This interest has prompted the majority of the Church to embrace a pre-millennial hope in the return of Christ (i.e., Christ will come at the end of the tribulation and will rule for a thousand years in Jerusalem).

However, many believers today would be shocked to discover that a different millennial persuasion has dominated much of the Church's history. For over 1500 years Amillennialism (the belief that Christ's 1000 year reign is exercised spiritually through the Church) was the prevailing dogma.

Eusebius, Augustine, Jerome, and even sixteenth century reformers like Martin Luther all upheld amillennialism as the only orthodox position. Concerning the Anabaptists the Augsburg Confession condemningly states, "Who now scatter Jewish opinions that before the resurrection of the dead, the godly shall occupy the kingdom of the world, the wicked being everywhere suppressed" (Art. XVII).

At first glance it seems amillennialism has an unbeatable heritage. However, a thorough survey of the first 2½ centuries of Christian history proves that pre-millennialism, or chiliasm as it was then called, has a heritage all its own.

The apologists who looked forward to the thousand year reign of Christ not only were godly men and scholars in their own rite, but also were contemporaries of those who studied under the Apostle John. One would think that men like Polycarp and Papias had a fairly accurate understanding of what their teacher was conveying in Revelation chapter 20!

No one should ignore the prominence of chiliasm in this early period. Writings from the second and third centuries, in retrospect, attest that pre-millennialism, and not amillennialism, was the viable hope of a persecuted Church.

Barnabas

The earliest Christian witness to chiliasm is the epistle of Barnabas. This document was written in Alexandria sometime during the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian (ca. A.D. 100) or possibly earlier (ca. A.D. 70-79).¹ Barnabas, who was a layman and not the Apostle, wrote to encourage a church that was undergoing tribulation:

¹ The allusion to a recent destruction of the Jerusalem temple has led some to prefer an earlier date (Lightfoot's, *Apostolic Fathers*). The author's extensive use of the OT and not the NT may also indicate an early composition.

“But I, not as though I were a teacher, but as one of yourselves, will show forth a few things, whereby ye shall be gladdened in the present circumstances. Seeing then that the days are evil, and the Active One himself² has the authority, we ought to give heed to ourselves and to seek out the ordinances of the Lord” (1:8-2:1).

Barnabas viewed the current events of his day as the direct fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy concerning the ten kingdoms and the little horn (Dan. 7:7-8, 24-25). As he states elsewhere;

“And let us hate the error of the present time, that we may set our love on the world to come: let us not give loose reins to our soul, that it should have power to run with sinners and the wicked, lest we become like them. The final stumbling block approaches.³

Although Barnabas reminded the church of its suffering, his ultimate objective was to bring consolation. Using OT typology he disclosed Christ and his kingdom. In chapter fifteen of his epistle Barnabas set forth his millennial hope. The author found in Gen. 2:2 not just a recounting of creation, but God’s spiritual projection for his dealings with mankind:

“Attend, my children, to the meaning of this expression, “He finished in six days.” This implieth that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with Him a thousand years. Therefore, my children, in six days, that is, in six thousand years, all things will be finished. “And He rested on the seventh day,” This meaneth: when His Son, coming again, shall destroy the time of the wicked man, and judge the ungodly, and change the sun, and the moon, and the stars, then shall He truly rest on the seventh day.”

These passages clearly represent a belief in the millennium. However, Barnabas continued to develop his eschatology. The thousand year rest symbolized by the seventh day will be followed by an eighth day which represents the eternal state; “When giving rest to all things, I shall make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, a beginning of another world” (ch. 15).

The Epistle of Barnabas was such an encouragement to the early believers, that those who compiled Codex Sinaiticus deemed it worthy to be placed after the book of Revelation, not as part of the Canon, but possibly as a commentary to the Apocalypse. Although other Church fathers present chiliasm in clearer language, this epistle is a valuable resource for this subject.

Papias

² The Latin text states, “the adversary,” the Ante-Nicene Fathers, “Satan,” the Greek text, “and he who works holds the authority.” This phrase is similar to 2 Thess. 2:7-8.

³ The word “approaches” in Greek is in the perfect tense. This sentence could be translated, “The complete or ultimate stumbling block is at hand or has come near” (i.e. the man of lawlessness).

No one wishing to do justice to early chiliasm can subtract Papias from the list of witnesses. This man, who lived sometime between A.D. 70-163, served his church in Hierapolis as a bishop. The church's location in the Province of Phrygia afforded Papias with many privileges: he had firsthand audience with the Apostle John, who resided in nearby Ephesus, he shared intimate fellowship with John's disciple Polycarp, who was bishop in Symrna, and he sought out personal contact with many who had heard the Lord Jesus and his Apostles.

Papias' hunger for the truth caused him to make the most of these opportunities. As he wrote in his "Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord":

"For I did not, like the multitude, take pleasure in those who spoke much, but in those who taught the truth; nor in those who related strange commandments, but in those who rehearsed the commandments given by the Lord to faith, and proceeding from truth itself. If, then, any one who had attended on the elders came, I asked minutely after their sayings, what Andrew or Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the Lord's disciples: which things Aristion and the Elder John, the disciples of the Lord, say" (Book I).

Through these inquires many, otherwise, lost traditions have been preserved, however, only in the writings of other men. Students of Church history mourn the fact that no copies of Papias' "Oracles of the Lord" have been discovered to date. All that remain of his exposition are brief quotations found in the writings of Irenaeus and Eusebius.

According to Irenaeus the Oracles of Papias were divided into five parts (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*; III, 39). In his fourth section Papias documented an oral quotation that supposedly was uttered by the Lord Jesus himself:

"The days will come in which vines shall grow, having each ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs, and in each true twig ten thousand shoots, and in every one of the shoots ten thousand clusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes, and every grape when pressed will give five and twenty metretes of wine..."

This citation continues to describe a similar future prosperity for grain, fruit and the animals; the millennium will be a time when the wolf will lie down with the lamb.

Although it is questionable whether the Lord Jesus spoke these exact words, it is obvious that many people unashamedly embraced a premillennialism that is rooted in the OT and was affirmed by the Messiah.

Eusebius has also perpetuated Papias' writings. In his Ecclesiastical History (book III, ch. 39) the historian recorded traditions concerning miracles and the authorship of certain NT books. Intertwined among them Eusebius made reference to Papias' millennial belief:

"The same person, moreover, has set down other things as coming to him from unwritten tradition, amongst these some strange parables and instructions of the Savior, and some other

things of a more fabulous nature. Amongst these he says that there will be a millennium after the resurrection from the dead, when the personal reign of Christ will be established on earth.”

The “strange parables” Eusebius mentions are probably those that are cited above, and because he was an amillennialist, he viewed Papias’ beliefs as “of a more fabulous nature,” in other words bizarre.

Although Eusebius was not a chiliast, he has left us with an invaluable witness for second century premillennialism.

Justin Martyr

One of the most able men to present a defense for the Christian faith was Justin Martyr. He was born in Samaria sometime around A.D. 110, and was martyred in A.D. 165 during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.

Justin’s extensive traveling and his vast exposure to philosophy and religion provided him with a wealth of knowledge. He used the arts of rhetoric that were promoted by the philosophical schools to prove that Christianity was the only true philosophy.

In his “Dialogue with Trypho” the apologist sought to prove from the OT that Jesus was the Messiah and that Christianity was superior to Judaism. It is in this dialogue that Justin elaborated on his millennial expectation.

Because of Justin’s extensive witness to Chiliasm, only a few passages can be cited here.⁴ In Chapter 80 Trypho the Jew (probably a hypothetical opponent) questioned Justin’s belief in the thousand year reign of Christ. Justin assured him that, not only he, but many others held to the same opinion.

He demonstrated true charity toward many pious Christians who disagreed with his millennial stance, and yet he deemed pre-millennialism as the true orthodox position:

“But I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged as the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare” (Ch. 80).

In chapter 81 Justin supported his doctrine by appealing to the Prophets and the Apostle John. His eschatology was derived from a literal approach to both Testaments; to him this was more than a Jewish dream, it was a biblical revelation.

⁴ For further study see “Dialogue with Trypho;” chapters 32, 51, 80, 81, 110, 113.

Irenaeus

Probably the greatest apologist and writer of the second century was Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202). He was trained under Polycarp (John's disciple) and eventually became bishop in Lyons. Like no other, Irenaeus threw himself into the apologetic arena with every heretical group that he came in contact with.

In his "Against Heresies" (ch. 23-36) Irenaeus delineated an extremely thorough eschatology.⁵ Because he drew from the entire Bible (Genesis through Revelation), only a brief sketch can be given here.

Irenaeus outlined his millennial expectation in the final chapters of "Against Heresies." Like his contemporary Justin, Irenaeus endorsed the literal fulfillment of the OT promises. In his summation of John's Revelation (which could almost pass as a commentary on the book), Irenaeus cited the Church father Papias; Christ's thousand year rule will follow the great tribulation and the persecutions of Anti-christ. After this time of unlimited prosperity Satan will be loosed for a short time and then condemned and the final resurrection and judgment will take place.

The testimony of this western father has strong validation because of his intensive study and exposition of the Scriptures and his personal link to Johannian interpretation.

After Irenaeus came other men who had the same hope: Tertullian, Commodian, Lactantius, Methodius, and Apollinaris of Laodicea all advocated pre-millennial doctrine; doing so, however, under increasing opposition.

By the beginning of the fourth century millennial teaching was, for the most part, extinguished throughout the Roman empire. For the next 1500 years pre-millennialism was rejected as heresy. This stimulates an important question; Why was this doctrine, that was so well attested to in the first centuries, subsequently rejected and classified as heretical? There seem to be three reasons for this abrupt transition.

First, certain heretical individuals and sects taught a form of premillennialism. Cerinthus the arch-heretic and enemy of the Apostle John believed that Christ would reign in an earthly kingdom and the saints would pass their time indulging in every appetite and lust: eating, drinking and marrying. Some even suggested that John's Revelation was a forgery composed by Cerinthus.⁶

The Montanists also stringently subscribed to chiliasm. However, according to their teaching Christ would not reign in Jerusalem but in Pepuza, Phryia. The Church father Caius of Rome condemned both of these groups and pre-millennialism along with them.

⁵ Irenaeus even gives some possible meanings for the number of the beast (ch. 30).

⁶ See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*; III. 28

Second, the Alexandrian school of interpretation fostered an allegorical approach to Revelation 20, just as it did to the rest of Scripture. Both Origen and his disciple Dionysius harshly objected to “the promises of the future looked for in bodily pleasure and luxury.” As Origen describes the chiliasts, “Certain persons, then, refusing the labor of thinking, and adopting a superficial view of the letter of the law.”⁷

Although the Church later condemned Origen’s methodology, remnants of his approach to Scripture have been preserved in amillennialism.

Third, the apparent delay of Christ’s coming and the triumph of his Church over the Roman empire were the final blows against pre-millennialism. The raging persecutions had ended and the time of prosperity described in the Prophets and Revelation would be fulfilled by a spiritual reign of Christ through the Church.

Although the three reasons listed above seemed plausible at the time of their inception, history has shown them to be insubstantial. What cult has not taken promises from the Bible (as Cerinthus did) and perverted them for their own advantage? How many errors have been propagated because people have broken the canons of correct biblical interpretation? And by no means can the tyrannical rule of the Roman Catholic Church be interpreted as Christ reigning through his Church; even Origen would not have read this interpretation into Revelation 20.

Therefore, using the hindsight that history has afforded us, let us wholeheartedly embrace a pre-millennial hope that is both biblical and historical. Let us find strength through the testimony of these early saints to watch for the blessed hope; the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

⁷ This superficial view is another way of saying “literal interpretation.” Origen’s “labor of thinking” meant reading between the lines looking for a hidden meaning. See Origen, *De Principiis*, II. 11