

Pre-Millennialism and the Early Church Fathers

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In this paper, I will show that the earliest fathers of the church (before 300 AD) primarily believed in a literal millennium. This will be accomplished by consulting the primary sources, the fathers themselves, and other writings about the views of the early fathers. Those early fathers who wrote about this issue will be dealt with one at a time.

Papias

The fourth century church historian Eusebius considered Papias to be a primary source for the millennial views of early fathers. He wrote:

In these [Papias' accounts] he says there would be a certain millennium after the resurrection, and that there would be a corporeal reign of Christ on this very earth; which things he appears to have imagined, as if they were authorized by the apostolic narrations, not understanding correctly those matters which they propounded mystically in their representations. . . . yet he was the cause why most of the ecclesiastical writers, urging the antiquity of the man, were carried away by a similar opinion; as, for instance Irenaeus, or any other that adopted such sentiments.¹

All we have of Papias' writings are fragments taken from other ancient writers. He was evidently associated with Polycarp and John the apostle. Irenaeus said, "And these things [a futuristic, restored, Jewish kingdom] are borne witness to in writing by Papias, the hearer of John, and companion of Polycarp, in his fourth book."² It is debated whether or not Papias was actually a personal acquaintance of the Apostle John, but that he taught a literal millennium is not. Larry Crutchfield provides a thorough discussion of Papias' millennial view and his possible association with John and concludes: "When all of the evidence is weighed in the balance it seems that the scales must be tipped in favor of Papias' discipleship under the aged author of the Apocalypse."³ Papias was born anywhere from 61 to 71 AD⁴ so could very well have known John. Since Eusebius who disagreed with Papias' millennial view and Irenaeus who agreed with Papias both considered him a proponent of a literal millennium, it is quite certain that he was.

The Epistle of Barnabas

The writer of the *Epistle of Barnabas* (cir. 117/132 AD⁵) held to the idea that after six thousand years of history that would correspond to six days of creation, there would be a seventh day "sabbath" rest which would last one thousand years. The following is from the *Epistle of Barnabas*:

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. And He Himself testifieth, saying, "Behold, to-day will be as 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.⁶

Hans Bietenhard sees possible Jewish influences such as the Book of Enoch at work here and comments: “On the universal Sabbath all things are brought to rest and a new world begins. From the time of Barnabas onwards millennial expectation was always within the framework of a universal week of 7000 years.”⁷

Justin Martyr

Justin in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (written cir. 155) describes the belief in a literal millennium as the orthodox doctrine, though admitting that some denied it. He sees the millennium centered in Jerusalem and predicted by Old Testament prophets. Justin wrote, “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.”⁸ Justin did mention that, “many who belong to pure and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise.”⁹ Evidently there were already others who did not believe in a literal millennium at that point in history, but Justin does not supply their names.

Since the actual debate with Trypho likely took place at Ephesus shortly after 135 AD, Larry Crutchfield sees a possible connection to the teachings of the Apostle John: “If Eusebius was correct, [about *Dialogue* taking place at Ephesus] the earliest extant Christian defense of the millenarian doctrine took place at Ephesus, not far from Patmos where John's revelation was received.”¹⁰ Crutchfield speculates about the possibility that Justin had contact with Polycarp or Papias which may have influenced his teaching: “In any case, whether Justin made contact with either man or not, a sojourn in Ephesus would have thoroughly exposed him to the teachings of the apostle John and the venerable Asiatic bishops [Polycarp & Papias].”¹¹ Whatever the validity of this speculation, Justin claimed his teaching was based on Scripture, which is the authority he cited in seeking to convince Trypho.

Irenaeus

Irenaeus discusses Biblical prophecy in *Against Heresies* (written from 180 to 199 AD¹²). Irenaeus mentions the “seventh day” in regard to eschatological promises. He wrote, “These [promises given by Christ] are to take place in the times of the kingdom, that is, upon the seventh day, which has been sanctified, in which God rested from all the works which He created, which is the true Sabbath of the righteous, which they shall not be engaged in any earthly occupation; but shall have a table at hand prepared for them by God, supplying them with all sorts of dishes.”¹³ Irenaeus considered the promise that Jesus made to His disciples at the last supper to one day drink the fruit of the vine again with them “in my Father's kingdom” to be proof of a future, earthly kingdom to be established after the resurrection.

Interestingly, Irenaeus also mentioned the promise of land that God gave to Abraham in this connection: “If, then, God promised him the inheritance of the land, yet he did not receive it

during all the time of his sojourn there, it must be, that together with his seed, that is, those who fear God and believe in Him, he shall receive it at the resurrection of the just.”¹⁴ Irenaeus firmly believed that Jesus would literally reign in a rebuilt Jerusalem.¹⁵ He also anticipated the allegorizing of Biblical prophecy: “If, however, any shall endeavor to allegorize prophecies of this kind, they shall not be found consistent with themselves in all points.”¹⁶

Shirley Jackson Case summarizes Irenaeus' millennial view:

This period of millennial bliss corresponds to the seventh day of rest following the six days of creation described in Genesis. During this time the earth is marvelously fruitful. Jerusalem is magnificently rebuilt, and the righteous joyfully become accustomed to the new life of incorruption. After this preliminary regime of bliss has passed, a final judgment of all the world is instituted, and the new heaven and the new earth are revealed. In this final state of blessedness the redeemed shall live in the presence of God, world without end.¹⁷

It is notable how closely Irenaeus' understanding is to that of many pre-millennialists today.

Tertullian

We learn of Tertullian's pre-millennialism through his debate against the heretic Marcion (cir. 207-212 AD). Obviously, a physical, rebuilt Jerusalem could have no validity for Marcion since he considered anything physical to have been created by a lesser "demiurge," the God of the Jews. Hans Beitenhard explains Marcion's view, “A little later [after Irenaeus] Tertullian found it necessary to defend the millennial hope against Marcion, who denied that the Christian can have any hope for a world created by the Demiurge. The Demiurge as the God of the Jews would restore the Jews to Palestine, and there they could set up their own Messianic kingdom.”¹⁸

Tertullian rejects Marcion's version of the millennium, but not a literal millennium itself:

But we do confess that a kingdom is promised to us upon the earth, although before heaven, only in another state of existence; inasmuch as it will be after the resurrection for a thousand years in the divinely-built city of Jerusalem, ‘let down from heaven,’ which the apostle also calls ‘our mother from above;’ and, while declaring that our *politeuma*, or citizenship, is in heaven, he predicates of it that it is really a city in heaven. This both Ezekiel had knowledge of and the Apostle John beheld.¹⁹

Tertullian's idea takes an odd twist when he goes on to claim the heavenly city had been seen suspended over Judea for forty days.²⁰ Also, Tertullian evidently joined the Montanists whose eschatological views were rather bizarre. Beitenhard thinks that, “unwittingly and against his will [i.e. he did not intend to discredit pre-millennialism] Tertullian helped to discredit the millennial hope by joining the Montanists.”²¹ Nevertheless, Tertullian was a pre-millennialist.

Hippolytus of Rome

Hippolytus (cir. 170-236) wrote extensively about the end times, including, *Commentary of Daniel*. Hippolytus took up the idea of a day being one thousand years and applied it to

history. He reasoned:

For the first appearance of our Lord in the flesh took place in Bethlehem, under Augustus, in the year 5500; and He suffered in the thirty-third year. And 6,000 years must needs be accomplished, in order that the Sabbath may come, the rest, the holy day “on which God rested from all His works.” For the Sabbath is the type and emblem of the future kingdom of the saints, when they “shall reign with Christ,” when He comes from heaven, as John says in his Apocalypse: for “a day with the Lord is as a thousand years.” Since, then, in six days God made all things, it follows that 6,000 years must be fulfilled. And they are not yet fulfilled, as John says: “five are fallen; one is,” that is, the sixth; “the other is not yet come.”²²

David G Dunbar comments on Hippolytus' view, “Christians ought not to think that the present sufferings of the church are the eschatological woes signaling Christ's return, for that return is not imminent. In support of this argument Hippolytus employs the creation-week typology widely accepted in the west until Augustine.”²³ Dunbar goes on to explain how Hippolytus sets the time of Christ's return in 500 AD.²⁴

Though this date setting is obviously problematic, Hippolytus asserted the idea that there would be a “Sabbath” rest which will be a time when the saints will reign with Christ. Though he does not use the term “millennium,” clearly his schema of a day being one thousand years would make the Sabbath rest last for a millennia. Bietenhard considers Hippolytus a chiliast: “Hippolytus places the millennial hope within the schema of a universal week of 7000 years.”²⁵ Interestingly, in another article Dunbar states, “Only in his *Chapters Against Gaius* does he present a forthright attack on amillennialism, and even here his own position is so muted as to be unclear.”²⁶ It seems to me that Hippolytus' position is clear enough in the above quoted Commentary on Daniel.

Lactantius

Lactantius (cir. 250 - 317 AD) also wrote of a literal millennium. His views are based, however, partially on quotations from the Sibylline books. He writes, “But He, when He shall have destroyed unrighteousness, and executed His great judgment, and shall have recalled to life the righteous, who have lived from the beginning, will be engaged among men a thousand years, and will rule them with most just command.”²⁷ An interesting thing about Lactantius is that he supplies more details about the Millennium: “Then they who shall be alive in their bodies shall not die, but during those thousand years shall produce an infinite multitude, and their offspring shall be holy, and beloved by God; but they who shall be raised from the dead shall preside over the living as judges.”²⁸ According to Lactantius, resurrected saints shall coexist with mortals. He also includes the idea of Satan being bound for the thousand year period and the existence of pagan nations to be ruled over by the righteous.

Commodianus

Commodianus of North-Africa wrote about 240 AD. He also spoke of a literal Millennium. He writes, “They shall come also who overcame cruel martyrdom under Antichrist,

and they themselves live for the whole time, and receive blessings because they have suffered evil things; and they themselves marrying, beget for a thousand years.”²⁹

What Happened to the Millennium?

Since most of the earliest Fathers either taught a literal millennium (though clearly differing on details) or were silent on the matter, how did amillennialism become the predominant view of the Church from the fourth century on? Evidently Origen was the first to publically break with this tradition. Thomas D. Lea comments, “Before the time of Origen it was reasonably common to find the fathers expressing their belief in a personal second coming of Christ together with a millennial reign of the saints with Christ after their resurrection from the dead. Origen denounced millennialism perhaps because of his view that it overemphasized the sensual and the material.”³⁰ It is beyond the scope of this paper to address amillennialism among the fathers.³¹ Though adducing different sources and theories as to details, the earliest church fathers clearly taught pre-millennialism.

End Notes

1 . Eusebius Pamphilus, Ecclesiastical History, 3.39.13; trans. Christian Frederick Cruse (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 126.

2 . Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 5.33.4; in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* Alexander Roberts ed. vol. 1, 563.

3 . Larry V. Crutchfield, “The Apostle John and Asia Minor as a Source of Premillennialism in the Early Church Fathers,” in Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, vol 31 #4 (December 1988) 421.

4 . *ibid.* 420.

5 . see W.A. Jurgens, The Faith of the Early Fathers, (The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN, 1970) 14.

6 . The Epistle of Barnabas 15.4 in *op. cit.* *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 1 146.

7 . Hans Bietenhard, “The Millennial Hope in the Early Church,” The Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol. 6 (1953) 13.

8 . Justin *Dialogue* 80; *op. cit.* *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol 1, 239.

9 . *ibid.*

10 . *Op. Cit.* Crutchfield, 423.

11 . *ibid.*

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- 12 . Op. cit. Jurgens, 84.
- 13 . Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 5.33.2, op. cit. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 562.
- 14 . ibid. 5.32.2; 561.
- 15 . ibid. 5.34.4; 564.
- 16 . ibid. 5.35.1; 565.
- 17 . Shirley Jackson Case, The Millennial Hope, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1918) 164, 165.
- 18 . Bietenhard, 15.
- 19 . Tertullian, Against Marcion, 3.25; op. cit., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. III*, 342.
- 20 . ibid. 342,343.
- 21 . Bietenhard, 16.
- 22 . Hippolytus, Commentary on Daniel 2.4; *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol 5, 179.
- 23 . David G. Dunbar, "The Delay of the Parousia in Hippolytus," Vigiliae Christianae, vol 37, no. 4 (Dec. 1983) 315.
- 24 . ibid. 315,316.
- 25 . Bietenhard, 19.
- 26 . David G. Dunbar, "Hippolytus of Rome and the Eschatological Exegesis of the Early Church" The Westminster Theological Journal, vol 45 no. 2 (Fall, 1983) 337.
- 27 . Lactantius, The Divine Institutes, 7.24, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. VII, 219.
- 28 . ibid.
- 29 . Commodianus, The Instructions of Commodianus, chapt 54., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV, 212.
- 30 . Thomas D. Lea, "A Survey of the Doctrine of the Return of Christ in the Ante-Nicene Fathers," The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, vol. 29 no. 2 (June 1986) 176.

31 See Bob DeWaay, "The Millennial Hope and the Church," Critical Issues Commentary, Issue #27 (March/April, 1995) where I present the theory that allegorization of Scripture, anti-semitism, and a realized eschatology that came with the Christianization of the Roman Empire starting with Constantine were causes of amillennialism's ascendance as the position of the Roman Catholic Church. <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue27.htm>