

The Church and Premillennialism: Part One*

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In his monograph “Premillennialism” in the *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, Samuel H. Kellogg writes, “It is commonly agreed by the best modern historians that, from the death of the apostles till the time of Origen, premillennialism was the general faith of those who were regarded as strictly orthodox Christians.”¹

A survey of church historians confirms Kellogg’s statement. Sheldon writes in his *Church History* (Vol. 1, 145) that “premillennialism was the doctrine of the Christians in the first and second century. The fathers expected anti-Christ to arise and reign and meet his overthrow at the personal coming of the Lord, after which the Kingdom of Christ for a thousand years would be established on the earth.” Dodwell (*Dissertations*, sec. 20) writes that “The primitive Christians believed that ‘the first resurrection’ of their bodies would take place in the kingdom of the millennium, and they considered that resurrection to be peculiar to the just.” Crippen writes in his *History of Doctrine* (231) that the early Fathers “distinguish between a first resurrection of the saints and a second or general resurrection which they supposed would be separated by a period of a thousand years, during which Christ should reign over

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¹ Philip Schaff, ed., *A Religious Encyclopedia of Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology, Based on the Real-Encyclopedia of Herzog, Plitt and Hauck*, third edition, New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1891, Vol. III, 1888.

the saints in Jerusalem.” Mede writes in his *Clavis Apocalyptica* that premillennialism “was the opinion of the whole orthodox Christian Church in the age immediately following St. John.” Geisler says in his *Church History* (Vol. I, 166) that “Millenarianism was the general belief of the time and met with almost no other opposition than that given by the Gnostics.” In his *Complete Body of Divinity* Stackhouse writes that “the doctrine [premillennialism] was once the opinion of all orthodox Christians.” In his *History of Christian Doctrine* (Vol. II, 415) Munscher (antimillenarian) writes, “How widely the doctrine of millenarianism prevailed in the first centuries of Christianity appears from this, that it was universally received by almost all teachers, and even some heretics agreed with them.” Maitland says in *The Prophetic Period in Daniel and St. John* that in the first two centuries “as far as I know no one, except such as were notoriously out of the pale of the church, had impugned the doctrine of the Millennium, as held by Justin, or taught any doctrine contrary to it.” In his *History of the Christian Church* (84) Fisher summarizes the extent of premillennialism in the church in the first two centuries: “The belief in a millennial kingdom on earth, to follow the second advent of Christ, was widely diffused.” Schaff, in his *History of the Christian Church* (Vol. II, 614) writes that “the most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years before the general resurrection and judgment.” Chillingworth in his *Works* (174, 347) writes that:

the doctrine [premillennialism] was believed and taught by the most eminent fathers of the age next after the apostles, and by none of that age opposed or condemned, therefore it was the catholic doctrine of those times . . . It appears manifest out of this book of Irenaeus that the doctrine of the chiliasts was in his judgment apostolic tradition, as also it was esteemed (for naught appears to the contrary) by all the doctors and saints and martyrs of or about his time; for all that speak of it, or whose judgments in the point are any way recorded, are for it; and Justin Martyr professes that all good and orthodox Christians of his time believed it, and those that did not he reckons among heretics.

In his monograph “Millennium” (*Encycl. Brit.*, 1894), Harnack (antimillenarian) writes that:

faith in the nearness of Christ’s second advent and the establishing of His reign of glory on the earth . . . appears so easily that it might be questioned whether it ought not to be regarded as an essential part of the Christian religion . . . This expectation was a prominent feature in the earliest proclamation of the gospel and materially contributed to its success . . . These enthusiastic expectations were inseparably bound up with the Christian faith down to the middle of the 2nd century . . . The fact that men clung to them is the clearest evidence that in the West millenarianism was still a point of orthodoxy in the 4th century.

Neander (postmillenarian), in his *General History of the Christian Religion and Church*, writes that Polycarp, Papias, Irenaeus, and Melito all “endeavored to maintain the pure and simple apostolic doctrine [premillennialism] and defend it against corruption.” Burton (postmillenarian) affirmed (Bampton Lectures, 1829) that “it cannot be denied that Papias, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and all the other ecclesiastical writers [through the second century] believed literally that the saints would rise in the first resurrection and reign with Christ upon earth previous to the general resurrection. Lardner (antimillenarian), in his *Credibility of the Gospel History* (Vol. IV, 513, 640, 641), writes that:

the Millennium has been a favorite doctrine of some ages and has had the patronage of the learned as well as the vulgar among Christians . . . It must be owned that the orthodox Millenarians [of the early church] do speak of one thousand years reign of Christ before the general resurrection, which good men, having been raised from the dead, should spend on this earth . . . They certainly grounded their sentiments upon the Revelation and upon other books of the Old and New Testaments universally received.

Bp. Newton, in his *Dissertations on the Prophecies*, says “the doctrine of the Millennium was generally believed in the three first and purest ages.” Burnett writes in his *Theory of the Earth* (Vol. II, 184) that “the millennial kingdom of Christ was the general doctrine of the primitive church from the times of the apostles to the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) inclusively.” In his *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History* (Vol. I, 89), Mosheim writes concerning the attack against premillennialism by

Origen in the third century that “before this period an opinion had prevailed that Christ was to come and reign a thousand years among men before the entire and final dissolution of this world. This opinion . . . had hitherto met with no opposition.” Bush (who believed that the “millennium” began with the Edicts of Constantine, A.D. 312-323) writes in his *Millennium* that “there is ample evidence that the doctrine of the Chiliasts was actually the universal faith of more than one century,” that “during the first three centuries it was very extensively embraced,” and that “during the first ages of the church [premillennialism] seems to have obtained a prevalence so general as to be [regarded as] all but absolute catholic.”

The unanimous consensus of eminent church historians concerning the virtual universality of premillennialism in the apostolic and early church in the first three centuries and the continuing preponderance of the doctrine until after Augustine (d. 430) is impressive and conclusive. Let us cite one more source. In his *Discourse on the Millennium* (236), Bp. Russell (antimillenarian) writes that with respect to the faith of the early church, “in reference to the sure and certain hope entertained by the Christian world that the Redeemer would appear on earth and exercise authority during a thousand years, there is good ground for the assertion of Mede, Dodwell, Burnet and other writers that down to the beginning of the fourth century the belief was virtually universal and undisputed.”

Russell, however, considered himself much better informed and wiser than the apostles and church fathers and saints of the first three centuries. He rejected apostolic premillennialism as “a Rabbinical fable which had no connection with the Gospel.” According to Russell, the apostles and early Christians erred in failing to recognize the symbolism of OT kingdom prophecies and accepting the realistic millenarianism of the Jews, who “understood the Millennium literally: the word had no double sense in their creed; it was not in their estimation the emblem or shadow of better things to come; on the contrary, it denoted the actual visible appearance of the Messiah and the establishment of his kingdom upon earth as the sovereign of the elect people of God” (47).

PREMILLENNIALISM IN THE BIBLE

Antimillenarians like to assert that the premillennialism of the apostolic and early church derived from the literal millenarianism of Jewish apocalyptic literature and theology of the intertestamental period. The assertion is true. And there is truth beyond it: the literal millenarianism

of the Jewish eschatology of Jesus' day is intrinsic in the body of OT prophecy. And there is more truth: Jesus totally accepted the literal millenarianism of Jewish eschatology, confirmed it in his teachings, and left it intact (though more sharply defined) in the body of doctrine of the primitive church.

OT prophecy anticipates a Messianic kingdom on earth following the advent of Messiah. In general, OT kingdom prophecies indicate that the Messianic kingdom is to endure forever.² Isaiah associates the new heavens and earth with the Messianic kingdom (Isa. 65:17, 66:22 with context), and Jewish scholars earlier considered the new earth as the locus of the Messianic kingdom (a concept not wrong, but not the whole of the truth). But during the inter-testamental period Jewish scholars came to recognize that a temporal limitation of the Messianic kingdom is implied in the following considerations: Though prophecy anticipates the eventual abolition of death (Isa. 25:8; Hos. 13:14), in the Messianic kingdom aging will continue (Zech. 8:3-5) and death will remain a fact of human experience (Isa. 65:20). Furthermore, though greatly restrained, sin will remain a fact of human conduct in the Messianic kingdom (Isa. 65:20; Jer. 31:30). As the root of death, however, sin must be abolished totally and forever before the beginning of the Eternal Age of the new heavens and earth. Thus the Messianic kingdom must somehow be eternal, and yet an interim between the advent of Messiah and the abolition of sin and death, which will occur only at the inauguration of the Eternal Age. From these considerations it becomes evident that the Messianic kingdom is in one aspect eternal, but in another aspect it is an interim between the advent of Messiah and the inauguration of the Eternal Age. (As we observe elsewhere in this study, at the conclusion of the Messianic Age and the inauguration of the Eternal Age of the new heavens and earth, the Messianic kingdom will not go out of existence, but will be "delivered up to God the Father" to be merged with the total kingdom of God in its final eternal dimension.)

In the inter-testamental period, Jewish scholars came to recognize a temporal limitation of the Messianic kingdom implicit in the eschatology of the Tenach (OT). But the Tenach implies no definition of the duration of the interim kingdom, and this became a matter of speculation. The

² Cf. Dan. 2:44; 7:14, 18, 27; Isa. 9:6, 7; 54:1-10; 55:12-13; 59:20, 21; 60:15-21; Jer. 24:6; 31:31-40; 32:37-41; Ezek. 37:21-28; 39:21-29; Amos 9:11-15; Mic. 4:6-8.

most popular conjectures were four hundred and a thousand years. In any case, whatever the duration of the Messianic kingdom in its temporal phase, the concept of the kingdom as both eternal and in some sense an interim between the advent of Messiah and the inauguration of the Eternal Age of the new heavens and new earth became firmly established in Jewish eschatology.

Thus Jewish “millenarianism” (if we may thus speak of it), without positive definition of the duration of the temporal phase of the Messianic kingdom, was the faith of the faithful in Israel who were “looking for the kingdom” at the time of the appearing of Jesus. It was the faith of the apostles from the beginning of their encounter with Jesus (Jn. 1:49), and it continued to be their faith during their association with him through the years of his public ministry (Lk. 19:11). It is a faith which Jesus continually confirmed, even to the end of his many months among them (Mt. 19:28) and his final hours with them before his death (Lk. 22:28-30). Jewish “millenarianism” continued to be the faith of the apostles at the conclusion of Christ’s post-resurrection teaching concerning the kingdom (Acts 1:3, 6), a faith which Jesus finally and forever confirmed just before his ascension in his reply to the question concerning the time of the restoration of the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6, 7). At the ascension of Jesus, Jewish “millenarianism” became the apostolic premillennialism of the primitive church, and it is categorically defined in the teaching of the apostles (cf. Acts 3:19-21; 15:13-17; Rom. 11:25-29) and the whole consensus of NT eschatology.

The eschatology of the NT attaches itself in the first instance to that of the OT . . . The eschatology of the NT attaches itself also . . . to the popular faith of the Jews of its time, and to certain developments of thought and belief which had taken place in the period following that which produced the last of the OT books [developments which constituted an advance in the understanding of the prophetic disclosure of the OT] . . . In all that is of its substance [the NT eschatology] is in relation to Hebrew faith and has its point of issue in the principles and ideas of the Old Testament.³

When Jesus took leave of the apostles on Mount Olivet, he left them totally confirmed in their expectation of the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, uncertain only with respect to the precise time when the

³ S. D. F. Salmond, *Hastings Bible Dictionary*, Vol. I, 749, 756.

restoration will occur, other than that it will occur when Jesus returns from heaven (Acts 3:19-21). In his teachings, and especially through his fulfillment of all the prophecies pertaining to his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus gave to the whole body of OT Messianic prophecy a more precise definition and perspective. The apostles now knew that there are two advents of Messiah rather than one (as the OT prophecies imply, but which the apostles had failed to perceive). The two advents are separated by an interval of time during which God is "visiting the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name" (Acts 15:14), after which Messiah "will return and build again the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will build again the ruins thereof and I will set it up, that the remainder of men might seek after the Lord and all the Gentiles on whom my name is called, says the Lord who does all these things" (vv. 16, 17). When "the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (all who are to be gathered into the church in the present interim age), the partial blindness that has come upon Israel will vanish and the Deliverer will come "to turn away ungodliness from Jacob," and then "all Israel will be saved," for Israel is still beloved of God "for the sake of their forefathers, for the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:25-29). Though Jerusalem still is "trodden down by the Gentiles," it will not always be so, but only "until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Lk. 23:39). Christ will return to Jerusalem, and the people will welcome him with shouts of joy, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Mt. 23:39). These cardinal aspects of NT eschatology, the eschatology of the apostolic church, are fully consonant with the eschatology of the OT, the "Bible" of the church in the days of the apostles. Nothing in the NT negates or "qualifies" the realistic "millenarianism" of the OT prophecies and Jewish eschatology.

The principal advances of the NT eschatology over the OT with respect to the Messianic kingdom are (1) the definition of the duration of the interim phase of the Messianic kingdom as a thousand years, (2) the binding of Satan for the thousand years, (3) the resurrection and participation of the faithful of the churches in the reign of Messiah over the nations (together with the faithful of all ages), and (4) the loosing of Satan and final rebellion and destruction of many immediately preceding the general resurrection and judgment and inauguration of the Eternal Age of the new heavens and earth. These NT advances are in no way contrary to the OT eschatology. In the eschatology of both the OT and NT, the inauguration of the Messianic kingdom occurs at the coming of Messiah

with the deliverance for the people of God and judgment and destruction for the impenitent wicked. The eschatology of both the OT and NT is premillennial (if in the context of the OT prophetic disclosure we may think of the Messianic kingdom in its interim aspect as a “millennium”).

EARLY UNITY

The departure of the church from apostolic premillennialism to Augustinian amillennialism is easily traced from historical sources available to us, as we will now observe.

The earliest Christian composition known to us other than the books of the NT is the Epistle of Clement written from Rome to the church at Corinth sometime in the last decade of the first century. The apostolic premillennial eschatology is reflected in two passages. When Jesus returns to earth, “he will come quickly and will not tarry, and the Lord shall suddenly come to his temple, the Holy One for whom you look” (13:5). Though written after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, Clement’s letter implies the restoration of the temple before the advent of Christ, which the NT eschatology requires (cf. 2 Thess. 2:4; Rev. 11:1, 2). Clement also writes that the apostles went forth “preaching the good news that the Kingdom of God is coming” (42:3), predicating the kingdom as future, which again is according to NT premillennial eschatology.⁴

The Didache, or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, which appeared soon after the beginning of the second century, reflects the apostolic premillennialism as further defined by intimations in the writings of Paul and by affirmations in the Revelation, asserting that at the coming of Christ will occur “the resurrection of the dead, but not of all the dead, but as it was said, ‘The Lord shall come and all his saints with him.’ Then shall the world ‘see the Lord coming on the clouds of heaven’” (16:6-8). The resurrection “not of all the dead” but only of “all his saints” is a precise reflection of Revelation 20:4-6 with its teaching of a “first resurrection” of the “blessed and holy” and a later resurrection of “the rest of the dead.”

The Epistle of Barnabas, written about the same time as the Didache, also reflects the apostolic premillennialism. The writer declares that the faithful will possess the earth, not at the present time, but later: “We also,

⁴ As we observe elsewhere, the NT affirms both the Church as the kingdom of Christ in the present age, and also the Messianic kingdom as yet to come at the advent of Messiah.

being nourished on the faith of the promise and by the word, shall live and possess the earth . . . If then this does not happen at present, he has told us the time when it will: when we ourselves also have been made perfect as heirs of the covenant of the Lord” (6:17, 19). The faithful will possess the earth in “the day of the Lord,” when Christ returns:

“Lo, the day of the Lord shall be as a thousand years.” So then, children, in six days, that is in six thousand years, everything will be completed. “And he rested on the seventh day.” This means, when his Son comes he will destroy the time of the Wicked one, and will judge the godless, and will change the sun and the moon and the stars, and then he will truly rest on the seventh day (15:4, 5).

In the “six days, seventh day” thesis the epistle reflects elements of Jewish apocalyptic literature of the inter-testamental period, extra-biblical, but consonant with the premillennial eschatology of the OT.

The writer of the document known as *The Second Epistle of Clement to the Church at Corinth* (c. A.D. 150) writes that the Lord will come “to gather together all the nations, tribes, and languages,” and that at “the day of his appearing . . . the unbelievers ‘shall see his glory’ and might, and they shall be amazed when they see the sovereignty of the world given to Jesus and shall say: Woe unto us, that it was thou, and we knew it not and did not believe and were not obedient to the Elders when they told us of our salvation” (17:4, 5). That Messiah will assume “the sovereignty of the world” at his coming is consonant with the premillennial eschatology of the OT and NT (cf. Rev. 11:15; 2:25-27; 19:11-20:6).

In his *Epistle to the Philippians*, Polycarp (martyred 155) wrote that “if we please [Christ] in this present world we shall receive from him that which is to come, even as he promised to raise us from the dead, and that if we are worthy citizens of his community, ‘we shall also reign with him,’ if we have but faith” (5:2). Our future “reign with Christ” which Polycarp anticipates in the world “to come” after our resurrection is the millennial reign of Christ on earth. This is to be inferred from the fact that Irenaeus, who was a disciple of Polycarp (who was a disciple of John), was premillenarian, and his understandings reflect those of Polycarp (and John).

In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr, “the most important of the Apologists” (martyred 165), wrote:

But I and whoever are on all points right-minded Christians know 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 the others declare . . . (ch. 80).

And further, a certain man with us, named John, one of the Apostles of Christ, predicted by a revelation that was made to him that those who believed in our Christ would spend a thousand years in Jerusalem, and thereafter the general, or to speak briefly, the eternal resurrection and judgment of all men would likewise take place (ch. 81).

Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons and “the greatest of the anti-Gnostic fathers” (d. 202), wrote in his treatise *Against Heresies*:

But when this Antichrist shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign for three years and six months, and sit in the temple at Jerusalem. And then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending this man and those who followed him into the lake of fire, but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom, that is, the rest, the hallowed seventh day, and restoring to Abraham the promised inheritance, in which kingdom the Lord declared that “many coming from the east and from the west should sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (5:30).

The predicted blessing, therefore, belongs unquestionably to the times of the kingdom, when the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead (5:33).

John, therefore, with delight foresaw the first resurrection of the just and their inheritance of the kingdom of the earth (5:36).

As we have observed, Irenaeus was the pupil of Polycarp, who was a personal disciple of John. Without question one of the greatest theologians in the history of the church, Irenaeus was possibly the most influential man in the church from the time of the apostles until Augustine. His eschatological constructions precisely reflect the Revelation, understood realistically, and the premillennialism of the apostolic church.

EARLY OPPONENTS

The apostolic millenarianism “was expressly rejected during the first half of the second century only by most Gnostics” (Kellogg), but they were outside the pale of the church. Although, as Justin indicated to Trypho, by the middle of the century there were some in the church who were not millenarians (and therefore not orthodox, as Justin observes), in the church the first antimillenarian known to historians by name was Caius (or Gaius), a presbyter at Rome. In a tract against the Montanist Proclus (c. 210), Caius attacked the millennium as an invention of the Gnostic Cerinthus. To bolster his case he denied John’s authorship of the Revelation and asserted that it actually was written by the heretical Cerinthus to support the doctrine of the millennium, and that Cerinthus had attached John’s name to the Revelation to give it credibility. The fiction of the Cerinthian authorship of Revelation (and also of the Gospel of John) was an invention of the heretical sect known as the Alogi (appeared c. 170) who rejected the Gospel of John because of their opposition to its Logos Christology, denied the ministry and gifts of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of angels, and fanatically opposed the doctrine of the millennium. Although Caius was not of the Alogi, he adopted their fiction of the Cerinthian authorship of Revelation. He referred to the visions in Revelation as “monstrous stories” and argued that the book does not harmonize with the apostolic writings. In a reply to Caius (c. 215) Hippolytus of Rome demolished his arguments, and with the exception of Jerome, who exhibited some uncertainty, no Western church writer afterward seriously questioned the Johannine authorship of the Revelation.

Though Caius’s rejection of the apostolic premillennialism of the primitive and early church was heretical and his resort to the Alogian fiction of the Cerinthian authorship of the Revelation was inexcusable, his opposition to Montanism is understandable and appropriate. In A.D. 156, in the province of Phrygia, Montanus declared himself a prophet divinely chosen to proclaim the final apostolic prophecies. Following “visions,” he announced that Jesus would soon return and that the heavenly Jerusalem would descend to the city of Pepuza in Phrygia, from which Christ would reign in his millennial kingdom — a fabulous perversion of the apostolic premillennialism of the church. Montanus taught the most rigorous discipline and severe asceticism in preparation for the coming of Christ and the beginning of the millennium. He attracted many followers, including other “prophets and prophetesses.”

Hippolytus was as strongly opposed to Montanism as Caius and wrote against it in his *Refutation of All Heresies* (Book 8). But unlike Caius, in opposing the perversions of the Montanists, Hippolytus found no necessity for augmenting his case by rejecting the authenticity of the Revelation and the apocalyptic eschatology with its doctrine of the millennium and complete confirmation of the apostolic premillennialism of the primitive church. If the church were obliged to abandon every doctrine perverted by heretics and extremists, there would be little left to believe.

But extremes beget extremes. In reaction to the Montanist perversions, an antimillenarian party gradually developed in the church, of whom Caius is the first individual whom historians can identify. But he had little effect on the church in his day, and premillennialism continued to prevail among the churches.

A precise reflection of the apostolic premillennialism of the early church is the statement of Tertullian (d. 225) in his treatise *Against Marcion*, "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" (3:25).

Commodianus wrote in his *Instructions* (c. 225), "They shall come also who overcame cruel martyrdom under Antichrist, and they themselves live for the whole time, but from the thousand years God will destroy all those evils" (44). His words clearly reflect the apocalyptic premillennial eschatology.

THE ALEXANDRIAN HERMENEUTIC

The first effective opponent of premillennialism was Origen (d. 253), who followed Pantaenus and Clemens of Alexandria as head of the catechetical school at Alexandria in 202 and founded a catechetical school in Caesarea in 232. Pantaenus introduced a "scientific" method of interpreting the Scriptures, and Clemens (who styled himself a "Christian Gnostic" and advocated various Gnostic "truths" he regarded as valuable, cf. his *Miscellanies*) laid the foundation for the allegorical method of interpretation which Origen adopted and further developed and systematized. Origen taught that the Scriptures are to be understood on three levels which correspond to the three aspects of man — body, soul, and spirit: (1) the somatic, or literal sense, corresponds to the physical body and can be understood by ordinary Christians; (2) the psychic, or moral sense, corresponds to the soul (or mind) and is intended to provide

ethical guidance for those who can understand it; and (3) the pneumatic, or spiritual sense, corresponds to the spirit and can be understood only by Christians well advanced in mysticism. It is noteworthy that Gnosticism divided mankind into three classes: the physical, fleshly, carnal (*sarkikoi*), the psychic (*hulikoi*), and the spiritual (*pneumatikoi*). The three classifications correspond precisely to Origen's three levels of the significance of the Scriptures. Like Clemens, Origen was an ardent admirer of the philosophical system of Plato, from whom Gnosticism drew heavily (as well as from Oriental mystical religions). According to Origen, sometimes the mystical meaning of a Bible text may coincide with the literal sense, but usually the mystical sense must be distinguished from the literal meaning. The mystical sense must be found through application of the allegorical method of interpretation which seeks hidden meanings concealed within the text. The literal sense of a passage is acceptable "except where it suggests thoughts unworthy of God and contrary to reason." However, the mystical sense of Scripture passages is of supreme importance and is always to be sought by those who are able to interpret the Scriptures on the spiritual level. Moller writes that Origen's "mystical sense includes the higher speculative ideas which may be drawn from Scripture" and that "Origen revelled in its application."⁵

Mosheim, who said that Origen opposed premillennialism "with the greatest warmth because it was incompatible with some of his favorite sentiments," wrote concerning the baleful influence of Origen's hermeneutical method that:

he was first among those who have found in the Scriptures a secure retreat for all errors and idle fancies. As this most ingenious man could see no feasible method of vindicating all that is said in the Scriptures against the cavils of the heretics and the enemies of Christianity provided he interpreted the language of the Bible literally, he concluded that he must expound the sacred volume in the way in which the Platonists were accustomed to explain the history of their gods. He therefore taught that the words in many parts of the Bible convey no meaning at all; and in some places where he acknowledged there was some meaning in the words, he maintained that under them there was contained a hidden and concealed sense which was much to be preferred to their literal meaning. And this hidden sense it is that he searches after in his

⁵ Moller, "Origen," Schaff-Herzog *Rel. Encycl.*, 1883.

commentaries, ingeniously indeed, but perversely, and generally to the entire neglect and contempt of the literal meaning.⁶

Neander writes that the

intellectual and scientific direction of the Alexandrian school, which had so great an influence generally in spiritualizing the system of faith, must have contributed also to spiritualize the ideas concerning the kingdom of God and of Christ. Origen in particular was a zealous combatant of these sensual [realistic] notions of the millennium, and sought after a different explanation of those passages of the Old and New Testament on which the Chiliasts depended, and all of which they took in the most literal sense. Add to this, that the allegorical method of interpretation, peculiar to the Alexandrian school, was generally in direct opposition to the grossly literal interpretation of the Chiliasts. The moderate Alexandrians, who were no friends to expurgatory criticism, did not reject the Apocalypse at once as an unchristian book, with a view to deprive the Chiliasts of this important support; they only combated the literal interpretation of it.⁷

The Revelation indeed offers “important support” to premillennialism. No rational man will quarrel with the judgment of W. Adams Brown that Revelation 19:11–20:6 “is most naturally understood as teaching a pre-millennial advent of Christ and an earthly reign.”⁸ But the “most natural understanding” of the passage is unacceptable to antimillenarians. The earliest antimillenarians, like the Alogi and Caius, rejected the Revelation as a forgery and totally fraudulent. But the Alexandrian antimillenarians, following the lead of Clemens and Origen, accepted the Revelation as authentic but interpreted it allegorically to accommodate it to their predilections. According to Mosheim, Origen opposed the doctrine of the millennium “because it contravened some of his opinions” (2:3:12) — opinions that derived not from the Scriptures, but from Greek thought, with which Origen was enamored. Mosheim writes that “In his four books *De Principiis*, [Origen] explained most of the doctrines of

⁶ Mosheim, *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History*, James Murdock, trans., London: Ward, Lock & Co., 1849, 2:3:5.

⁷ Neander, *General History of the Christian Religion and Church*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1847, 431.

⁸ “Millennium,” *Hastings Bible Dictionary*.

Christianity, or to speak more correctly, deformed them with philosophical speculations. And these books . . . were the first compendium of scholastic, or if you please, philosophic theology” (2:3:7).

Origen’s theology is indeed more philosophic than biblical. Both Clemens and Origen were ardent Neo-Platonists, and the allegorical propensity of Platonic philosophy furnished the mode for their interpretation of the Scriptures. Such interpretation enabled Origen to Hellenize much of his system of doctrine, including the rejection of the realistic eschatology of the early church in favor of the eschatological concepts of Greek thought, a totally spiritualized eschatology which posits incorporeal immortality as the eternal state beyond death — the release of the spirit from the confines of the body and the material world. For Origen, Paul’s “spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:44) was not a spiritual body (after the pattern of the resurrected body of Jesus, substantial “flesh and bones,” Lk. 24:39), but a disembodied spirit, a phantom without substance which only seems to appear, as posited by Hellenistic eschatology (cf. Gnostic Docetism). For Origen the “resurrection” of the body was really the annihilation of the body, the only acceptable “redemption of the body.” Enamored with Platonic philosophy, Origen considered the apostolic realistic eschatology of the church, with its doctrines of substantial resurrection and the millennium, unreasonable and unacceptable, and he opposed it vigorously, using allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures as his weapon against it.

The plague of the Alexandrian hermeneutic has continued through the centuries. Certainly allegory has its place in exposition, for the literature of the Bible contains allegory and literary figures of all sorts. Solomon’s beautiful Song of Songs is an allegory, and the allegory is a common literary device in the Bible, appearing in the letters of Paul (1 Cor. 10:4; Gal. 4:21-31). But tropical exposition must be candid rather than contrived, and while allegorical *applications* of non-allegorical passages may be useful and legitimate, allegorical *interpretations* of non-allegorical passages masquerading as “exegesis” indeed are not. Occasional use of allegory by the biblical writers and recognition of allegory wherever it occurs provides no license for the adoption of allegorical interpretation as a universal mode applicable to virtually every passage of the Bible. Such a method of interpretation invites the indiscriminate assumption that hidden within the simplest statement or passage of Scripture is some mystical meaning (the “essential” meaning, of course) to be extracted by the exegete who is sufficiently discerning and “spiritual.” What a

passage says philologically and grammatically becomes unimportant, and the “mystical” meaning is all that really matters. Eisegesis replaces exegesis, “exposition” becomes imposition, and the meaning of a passage becomes whatever may be invented by the fertile imagination of the interpreter.

The Alexandrian hermeneutic served Origen well in his attack against the realistic eschatology and apostolic premillennialism of the church. Through the centuries it has been the ready servant of inventors of all manner of heretical systems, the unfailing resource of irresponsible neologians and religious misleaders of every stripe. Concerning Origen and his system of interpretation, Adam Clarke has well observed that friends of apostolic Christianity “must lament that a man of so much learning and unaffected godliness should have been led to countenance, much less recommend, a plan of interpreting the Divine Oracles in many respects the most futile, absurd, and dangerous that can possibly be conceived.”⁹

Origen frankly acknowledged that the letter of Scripture posits a millennium and that rejection of millenarianism is accomplished only by interpreting the Scriptures allegorically: “They who deny millenarianism are they who interpret the sayings of the prophets by a trope, but they who assert it are styled disciples of the letter of Scripture only.” For Origen there was no need for any real correspondence between the *statement* of Scripture and the *meaning* of Scripture.

Such a stance negates the authority of the Scriptures. The literary interpretation of Scripture — philological, grammatical and syntactical, and contextual — is objective and tends toward categorical definitions with limited spectrum. The tendency of allegorical interpretation is in another direction, for it is subjective and deliberately speculative, which transfers authority from the Scriptures to the interpreter, whose ingenuity enables him to discover “hidden” meanings concealed under the words of the Scripture. The Bible indeed contains allegory, and it must be recognized wherever it occurs. But to adopt a tropical hermeneutic as our deliberate exegetical and theological stance is inimical to the authority of the word of the Scriptures and totally contrary to the example of Jesus and the apostles. “What saith the Scripture?”

⁹ *Sacred Literature*, 150.

DEFENDING PREMILLENNIALISM

In the main the church rejected Origen's "spiritualized" eschatology with the exception of his amillennialism, which (largely because of other factors which developed) gradually won increasing acceptance until the doctrine of the millennium eventually was virtually abandoned. But the apostolic premillennialism of the early church was not readily surrendered by the churches, and Origen's amillennialism was vigorously opposed, especially until after the Edicts of Constantine (312-323), and even until after the time of Jerome and Augustine (d. 430) as we will observe.

In his book *A Confutation of the Allegorizers*, Nepos, an Egyptian bishop (d. 250), wrote that the prophecies in the Scriptures concerning the Messianic kingdom on earth (including the prophecy of the millennium in the Apocalypse) are to be understood literally, as the church had held from the days of the apostles, rather than figuratively, as Origen and his disciples taught. Nepos taught that "after this (first) resurrection the Kingdom of Christ was to be upon earth a thousand years, and the saints were to reign with him."¹⁰

Following the death of Nepos, Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria and foremost pupil of Origen, wrote a book entitled *On the Promises* in which he contended for the allegorical interpretation of prophecies and the Apocalypse, as against Nepos (whom he honored as a Christian and a scholar). Dionysius did not reject the Apocalypse, but contended that it was written by some "John" other than the Apostle because it differs substantially from John's Gospel, and because the writer of the Apocalypse identifies himself whereas the Apostle John does not attach his name to his epistles or to his Gospel, and because neither John's epistles nor his Gospel mention the Apocalypse nor does the Apocalypse mention the epistles or the Gospel (Eusebius 7:25). The arguments obviously are extremely tenuous. Dionysius found the contents of the Revelation "too lofty to be comprehended by me . . . exceeding my capacity." He did find in the Revelation "certain concealed and wonderful intimations." Nepos' understanding of the Revelation, the traditional understanding of the church, seemed unreasonable to Dionysius, and so was to be rejected in favor of Origen's allegorical interpretation.

Cyprian (martyred 258), bishop of Carthage and the most influential leader in the church at the time of his death, held firmly to the apostolic

¹⁰ Daniel T. Taylor and H. L. Hastings, *The Reign of Christ on Earth*, Boston: H. L. Hastings, 1893, 75.

premillennialism of the early church. In his treatise *On Morality* (18) he wrote, “Why with frequently repeated prayers do we entreat and beg that the day of His kingdom may hasten, if our greater desires and stronger wishes are to obey the devil here, rather than to reign with Christ?” The question posits the kingdom and reign of Christ as future rather than present, reflecting the thesis of premillennialism.

Lactantius, Roman scholar and great Latin rhetorician (often called “the Christian Cicero”), private tutor of Constantine’s son, wrote in his *Divine Institutes* (c. 320):

When the Son of God shall have destroyed injustice, and shall have restored the just to life, he shall be conversant among men a thousand years, and shall rule with a most righteous government. At the same time the Prince of Devils shall be bound with chains, and shall be in custody for a thousand years of the heavenly kingdom, lest he should attempt anything evil against the people of God. When the thousand years of the kingdom . . . shall draw toward a conclusion, Satan shall be loosed again, and then shall be that second and public resurrection . . . wherein the unjust shall be raised (7:24).

Lactantius also spoke of “the thousand years of the heavenly empire, when righteousness shall reign on earth” (7:24). Lactantius’ words precisely reflect the premillennial eschatology as defined in the Revelation.

The realistic eschatology of the early church continued to prevail at the time of the First Council of Nicaea (325). A quotation from Gelasius’ *History of the Acts of the Council of Nicaea*, reflecting the consensus of the churches, anticipates:

the appearing of the great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ. And then, as Daniel says, “the saints of the Most High shall take the kingdom,” and “there shall be a pure earth, holy, a land of the living and not of the dead,” which David foreseeing by the eye of faith exclaims, “I believe to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living” — the land of the meek and humble. Christ says, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth,” and the prophet says, “the feet of the meek and humble shall tread upon it.”¹¹

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

The words anticipate the institution of the Messianic kingdom on earth at the advent of Christ and reflect the realistic eschatology which had prevailed among the churches from the days of the apostles.

CONSTANTINE'S IMPACT

A potent influence against the premillennialism of the churches was Constantine's Edicts (312-323), which ended the long persecution and made Christianity the religion of the Empire, with special privileges and financial benefits for the church. The sudden "triumph" of the church and the privileges and prosperity it now enjoyed confronted the church with radically altered prospects. Early Christians had expected persecution to continue until the coming of Christ. The dramatic shift in the church's earthly fortunes invited major theological reorientations and ultimately led to radical revision of the eschatological perspective of the church. Crippen writes in his *History of Doctrine* (232) that "while the church was alternately persecuted and contemptuously tolerated by the Roman Empire, the belief in Christ's speedy return and his millennial reign was widely entertained, [but] when the church was recognized and patronized by the state, the new order of things seemed so desirable that the close of the dispensation ceased to be expected or desired." Similarly Smith, in his *New Testament History* (273), writes that "after the triumph of Constantine, Christianity having become dominant and prosperous, Christians began to lose their vivid expectation of our Lord's speedy advent, and to look upon the temporal supremacy of Christianity as a fulfillment of the promised reign of Christ on earth."

The allegorists (who, following the lead of Origen, already had rejected apostolic premillennialism) understandably were the vanguard in the movement to interpret the prophecies and the Apocalypse in the light of historical developments, and the allegorical method of interpretation allowed men to accommodate the Scriptures to the new circumstance of the church with great facility.

The jubilant spirit among Christians following the "triumph" of the church is reflected in Eusebius' address before the bishop of Tyre and a great assembly in the newly constructed cathedral at Tyre in 326. In his lengthy address, entitled "A Panegyric on the Splendor of Our Affairs" (E. 10:4), Eusebius addresses the bishop as the "excellent ornament of this new and holy temple of God . . . a new Bezaleel, the architect of a

divine tabernacle; or a Solomon, the king of a new and better Jerusalem; or a new Zerubbabel, superadding a glory to the temple of God much greater than the former.” The church now is “like the very image of the kingdom of Christ,” and “the splendid ornaments and donations of this very temple, which themselves are noble and truly grand, worthy of admiration and astonishment, [are] expressive symbols of our Savior’s kingdom.” Israel, God’s former temple in the world, is gone, and the church has taken her place and has now become “the city of our God” (Eusebius’ phrase and thesis are reproduced in Augustine’s *City of God*). In the church, Christ’s kingdom has come to the world, and the triumph of the kingdom has begun. Christ has “again suddenly appeared, and destroying what was hostile and annihilating his foes,” he now reigns “as the universal king of all.” Eusebius quotes OT prophecies of the restoration and blessing of Israel, including many from Isaiah, and applies them to the church as now fulfilled — “facts” now realized: “Such were the oracles uttered before by Isaiah. These were the declarations respecting us anciently, recorded in the holy Scriptures. It was just, therefore, that we should at some time receive their truth in the facts themselves.”

The elation that attended the change in the earthly fortunes of the church is understandable, but the radical revision of the eschatological perspective of the church which followed was tragic. In Eusebius’ address are many lofty and beautiful thoughts, but his thesis and perspective are not those of the Scriptures nor of the church from the day of the apostles. They are not the thesis and perspective of the churches in the Council of Nicaea a year earlier. In the years to follow, however, they were to become increasingly the thesis and perspective of the churches until, 150 years later — half a century after Augustine, the apostolic premillennialism of the primitive church virtually disappeared among the churches.

Late in the fourth century, the writings of Tichonius of Carthage added still another factor which strongly militated against premillennialism among the churches. An enthusiastic disciple of Origen and the Alexandrian allegorists, Tichonius published his *Liber Regularum* (c. 382), “the first manual of biblical hermeneutics to appear in the West,” in which he presented

rules of interpretation enabling edification to be drawn from the Bible from every portion as it were, even from passages the most unpromising in appearance, [passages in which] the moral and

religious significance did not appear at first. These regulae seem to us to be passably ingenious; what is certain is that his contemporaries were enraptured with them . . . St. Augustine embodied [Tichonius'] seven rules of exegesis in his *De Doctrina Christiana*, thus perpetuating the influence of this vigorous, original, and in more than one case, disconcerting mind.¹²

The influence of “this vigorous, original, disconcerting” mind was perpetuated also in a “spiritual commentary” (as he called it) on Revelation, published about the same time. Using his ingenious rules of interpretation, Tichonius wrote “a spiritual interpretation of the Revelation” in which

he denied the future thousand-years reign of the righteous on the earth after the resurrection, holding that the twofold resurrection described in the Apocalypse denoted, on the one hand, the growth of the church, where those who were justified by faith were awakened by baptism from the deadness of their sins to the service of eternal life, and, on the other hand, the general resurrection of all flesh.¹³

The decisive influence of Tichonius' novel rules of interpretation and his “spiritual interpretation of Revelation” are indicated by Porter:

Through him “the Latin Church finally broke with all chiliastic inclinations and all realistic eschatology” (Bousset, 63). The “thousand years” denote the present period of the church between the First and Second Coming of Christ. He was followed by Augustine (*de civitate Dei*, xx. 7-17) and Jerome.¹⁴

It is not correct to say with Porter that the Latin Church broke with “all realistic eschatology,” for the Western church continued to believe firmly in the appearing of Antichrist at the end of the age, the personal advent of Christ, the bodily resurrection, and the conflagration of earth and coming of the new heaven and earth as the ultimate locus of the kingdom and the dwelling place of God and His people in the Eternal

¹² Pierre De Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1968, 294.

¹³ J. Haussleiter, “Tichonius,” *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953.

¹⁴ Frank C. Porter, “Revelation,” *Hastings Bible Dictionary*, 242.

Age. But certainly it is true that the writings of Tichonius were a decisive factor against “realistic eschatology” with respect to the millennium and apostolic premillennialism, principally because of their impact on Augustine.

Despite the cumulative effect of the increasing pervasion of the Alexandrian method of allegorizing the Scriptures, the far-reaching consequences of the “triumph” of the church under Constantine, and the growing influence of the writings of Tichonius, the doctrine of the millennium continued to be widely embraced among the churches until after the time of Jerome and Augustine. Epiphanius, bishop of Constantia (d. 403), affirms that many in his time held firmly to the doctrine, as he himself did.

Quoting the words of Paulinus, bishop of Antioch, concerning one Vitalius, whom he highly commends for his piety, orthodoxy, and learning, Epiphanius says: “Moreover, others have affirmed that the venerable man would say that in the first resurrection we shall accomplish a certain Millennium of years,” on which Epiphanius observes: “And that indeed this Millennium term is written of in the Apocalypse of John and is received of very many of them that are godly is manifest” (Lib. 3:2).¹⁵

Jerome (d. 420), decidedly antimillenarian, testifies concerning the predominance of millenarianism in his day. Commenting on Jeremiah, Jerome

says that “he durst not condemn the (Millennial) doctrine, because many ecclesiastical persons and martyrs affirm the same.” And again, speaking of the millenarian Apollinarius, he remarks: “An author whom not only the men of his own sect, but most of our people likewise follow on this point (Chiliasm), so that it is not difficult to prove what a multitude of persons will be offended with me.”¹⁶

Jerome’s admission that “most of our people” are millenarians indicates that at the end of the fourth century the apostolic premillennialism of the primitive church still largely prevailed among the churches. However, by the end of the fifth century premillennialism virtually had disappeared among the churches.

¹⁵ Taylor and Hastings, 91.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.