

**PREMILLENNIALISM IN THE ANTE-NICENE CHURCH:
WHY THE DIVIDE IN THE EARLY CHURCH ON CHILIASM?**

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I. INTRODUCTION

Generally scholars of systematic theology and patristics are in agreement that the earliest view of eschatology in the Church is premillennialism.¹ From the late first century until the time of Augustine in the fourth century, some form of premillennial expectation of Jesus' return was either the dominant view, or held by a number of prominent leaders and theologians of the Church.

The Church was still very young at the turn of the first century and this vibrant movement was only beginning to find its way in the midst of the pagan religion that surrounded it and the Roman Empire that was suppressing it. The Gentile Church possessed the Old Testament, in Greek, but the words of the apostles were in oral tradition in many quarters, though gradually the various New Testament books were being collected in the various Church centers of the Mediterranean world, being distinguished from extra-canonical books that were not inspired but considered valuable. John's Gospel, epistles, and the Apocalypse were newly written, and the books of this revered and aged apostle were read by the churches of Asia Minor, gradually finding their way to other Christian centers of the empire. The Church was not only enduring persecution from without, but inside the Christian communities different doctrines were being introduced that did not coincide with what had been received by the Church from the apostles. As well, there were still theological points that were not fully grasped by the Church. This is to be expected due to limited access to all of the New Testament writings, the lack of leisure to consider the various teaching, and the difficulty of some of the apostolic writings, even teaching that may have posed difficulty even for the apostle Peter (2 Pet 3:14–16).

Let me get to my purpose in this paper. It is not to argue that all of the ways in which the church fathers understood the biblical text or their eschatology was correct, or even that they were always consistent with their views. My purpose is also not to exegete the biblical text. Moreover, I am not attempting to say that all the fathers were

¹ See Millennium, Online Encyclopedia, http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/MIC_MOL/MILLENNIUM_a_ps... (last visited December 1, 2010).

premillennialists nor necessarily were all premillennialists dispensational.² I do hope to do is demonstrate, briefly, several things: 1) that some form of premillennial theology, or elements of premillennialism, was existent from the earliest records of the Church Fathers who chose to speak in any detail on eschatology, 2) that the reliance on Jewish understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures and of the Messianic kingdom was a positive influence in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene Fathers, and lastly, 3) that those who were premillennial in Asia Minor were influenced by either a literal reading of the Old Testament similar to the apostles or by association with John the apostle (evangelist, theologian, elder) in contrast to the largely allegorical manner of reading Scripture, increasing anti-Semitism, and ecclesiastical triumphalism that saw no need for a literal kingdom in light of the political nature of the Church in fourth century and afterwards. Obviously, to prove these matters in depth would require a major book, but hopefully we can begin the work in this paper.

II. THE VIEW OF THE EARLIEST POST-CANONICAL CHRISTIANITY ON THE PREMILLENNIAL COMING OF CHRIST AND HIS SUBSEQUENT MILLENNIAL REIGN ON THE EARTH

A. *The Premillennial Consensus of the Sub-Apostolic Fathers*

That Christians should differ on the interpretation of the biblical text is not surprising since only the source of truth is inspired and not the understanding of it. Since there were so many ways to interpret the Bible, the traditions that were handed down from the eyewitnesses and disciples of the apostles carried great weight, but they were not to be a substitution for interpretation of the text itself. The early Fathers often mentioned the understanding of various revered men, but never attributed to them authority above the biblical text. In my investigation of the Old and New Testaments, it appears clear to me that they teach a future millennial kingdom on this earth, in which the Davidic king will reign from Jerusalem during a period of perfect law and bliss, and that the coming of the King Messiah will precede this time. As someone who also holds to a pretribulational understanding of Christ's return for His Church before Daniel's 70th week, the Tribulation Period, I believe the glorious return in triumph with His Church will inaugurate the millennial period. It does not appear that all premillennial teachers of the second century held to this view, but certainly some later theologians of the second century did so.

But why would persons so close to times of the apostles not be in unison on all areas of doctrine? Should they not all have been able to sign various confessions and creeds that have formulated since their time? To require such uniformity is asking too much. Even persons who originally received the teachings of the Lord and that of the apostles did not always understand them fully, and some did not agree with the teaching and became teachers of error. Even when one is speaking about the Fathers of the Church who lived closest to the time of the apostles, there is no guarantee that they understood each text of Scripture correctly, so that their theology always squared with the teaching of the prophets, apostles and the Lord. In several areas of theology, it appears that they

² Larry V. Crutchfield has done an excellent work in demonstrating that many dispensational elements are found among the Church Fathers in a series of articles in the journal of the Conservative Theological Society, 2001.

began to deviate from the better understanding of Scripture on matters such as marriage, celibacy, asceticism, baptism, not in abandoning the subjects altogether but deviating in certain ways from the proper understanding of the doctrines. Consequently, never should we substitute the theology of the Fathers of the Church, early or late, for the teaching of Holy Writ. Having said this, it is nonetheless appropriate and wise to pay attention to the thinking of these men of God who poured over the Sacred Text, particularly if they were in contact with the apostles or those taught by them, to provide a corrective for us. The post-canonical writings are based in the canonical ones, and what the Scripture teaches, cannot be divorced entirely from the way in which early Christians interpreted the apostles.

There is no question that the teaching of the Old and New Testaments regarding the resurrection and future judgment was shared by all orthodox Fathers of the Church, and that there was universal acceptance of a second coming of the Lord, who would be instrumental in raising the dead and judging them. Other details are not necessarily developed by all of the Church Fathers in their works. This could be for a variety of reasons, namely, the purpose and occasion for their writing, as well as their not having made a commitment to many details of eschatology. As stated earlier, one cannot know how someone thinks about an area of theology unless they actually speak in some detail about their viewpoint. People omit many areas of discussion from talks and articles that they hold dear because of why they are writing and to whom. For example, I believe that the Song of Solomon is not some kind of allegory of Yahweh and Israel or Christ and the Church. Rather it is a wonderful statement of married love. In spite of this, I really don't think that I have made reference to the Song in any of my more than 30 books. The absence of my views on Solomon's book says nothing about what I believe about the book. May I suggest that this is true about the Fathers, as well. Moreover, I have given talks and written papers about a variety of subjects, but unless I was deliberately focused on a particular subject, I might mention it only in passing, or give limited expression of my perspective. I believe that this is what the Fathers often did, particularly the sub-apostolic Fathers such as Clement, Ignatius, or Polycarp.

There are differences among the Fathers in some of the details, but those who were most influenced by the apostles, and the method of interpretation received from them, tended to be premillennial in their view of the Lord's coming and reign. One may count among this group the following Church Fathers, authors, and Apologists:

- Clement of Rome (bishop of Rome, fl. ca. 90-100)
- Polycarp (bishop of Smyrna in western Asia Minor; ca. 70-155/160)
- Papias (bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia, Asia Minor, ca 70-130/155)
- Ignatius (bishop of Antioch in Syria, d. ca. 98/117)
- Author of Epistle of Barnabas (70-132)
- Justin Martyr (Samaria and Rome (ca. 100-165)
- Tatian (Assyrian, Rome, Antioch in Syria, ca. 120-180)
- Irenaeus (Asia Minor, bishop of Lyons, Gaul [France], ca 120-ca. 202)
- Hippolytus (presbyter and teacher in Rome, d. ca. 236)

- Tertullian (Carthage in Northern Africa, 150-225)
- Cyprian (bishop of Carthage, 200-258)
- Commodian (Africa, 200-270)
- Victorinus (bishop of Pettau, in Austria, 240-303)
- Nepos (230-280) (Arsinoe in Africa)
- Coracion (Egypt, 230-280)
- Lactantius (Italy, 240-330)
- Methodius (Thessalonica and Slavia, 250-311)

I have chosen not to demonstrate in this paper that each of these above persons held to chiliasm, since it would take a large number of pages simply to provide the evidence (even including others), and this has already been done at length in a number of articles by men such as Crutchfield, Ice, and Taylor. Suffice it is to quote from the learned historian, and non-premillennialist, Schaff, who says,

The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age [before the council of Nicea] is the prominent chiliasm, or millennarianism, 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.³

The historical evidence indicates that chiliasm (premillennialism, as it is called today) was the predominant belief of the church of the first three centuries. "And to make few words of it," as Thomas Burnet, royal chaplain to king William III of England, said, "we will lay down this conclusion, that the Millennial kingdom of Christ was the general doctrine of the Primitive Church, from the times of the Apostles to the Nicene Council; inclusively."⁴

The prevalence of premillennialism in the earliest centuries of the Church is a discomfoting truth to those who reject the view, but the facts of this are conclusive.

B. Rejection of the Traditional View of Early Premillennial Consensus

Not all subscribe to this perspective. For example, Ken Gentry says, quoting the work of D. H. Kromminga that among the various sub-apostolic writings (Clement of Rome's 1 Clement, the pseudo-Clementine 2 Clement, The Didache, the Ignatian epistles, Polycarp's Epistle, The Letter of the Church at Smyrna on the Martyrdom of Polycarp, Barnabas, Hermas, Diognetus, Fragments of Papias, and Reliques of the Elders), only Papias is premillennial.⁵ According to Gentry, Kromminga concludes that "an inquiry into the extent of ancient chiliasm will serve to show the untenableness of the claim that this doctrine was held with practical unanimity by the Church of the first few

³ Phillip Schaff. *The History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner & Company, 1884), p. 482.

⁴ Gary Vaterlaus, "Amillennialism vs Premillennialism," <http://www.rapturenotes.com/amillennialism.html> (last visited December 1, 2010), quoting Thomas Burnet, *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (London: J. McGowan, 1681), 346 (italics his).

³ Thomas Burnet. *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (London: J. McGowan, 1681), p. 346 (italics his)

⁵ Ken Gentry, "Premillennialism and the Early Church,"

<http://againstdispensationalism.blogspot.com/2009/06/premillen...> (last visited November 30, 2010).

centuries".⁶

A recent hero of Gentry is Charles E. Hill, who in his book *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, makes a fairly unique argument that chiliasm is either not advocated, or even is repudiated, in several fathers and writings of the early Church.⁷ As we shall see below, this claim of Gentry, and supposed evidence of Hill, does not fair well under scrutiny.

Next, Gentry sets forth the words of W. G. T. Shedd and recently deceased historian Jaroslav Pelikan. Shedd observed that "early millennialism was held mostly among Jewish converts. A few Apostolic Fathers held it as individuals, but those who do not mention the millennium had greater weight of authority and influence: Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp."⁸

Gentry believes that the words of church historian Jaroslav Pelikan, somehow is a *tour de force* against premillennialism in the early church: "It would seem that very early in the post-apostolic era millenarianism was regarded as a mark neither of orthodoxy nor of heresy, but as one permissible opinion among others within the range of permissible opinions."⁹

The nail in the coffin appears to be the fact that premillennialism never became an official view of the Church, set forth in its creeds, and that later confessions of the Reformation do not have more than general statements of the advent of Christ, the resurrection, and future judgment.¹⁰

What might surprise Gentry is that I don't disagree with a number of his claims, though I would attach different importance to them, and explain their existence for different reasons than he has. He is correct that many writings of the Church Fathers in the late first century and early second century do not speak to the matters of the millennium, or for that matter a number of other areas of theology, to which they may also ascribed if asked. This proves nothing, and is an argument from silence. This is like saying that several of the Church Fathers did not advocate belief in portions of the Old Testament if they did not quote them, or that they did not believe in the Lord's Supper, if they did not mention it in their extant works. Hill, lauded by Gentry, draws similar kinds of logical errors, something to be dealt with elsewhere. An argument from silence is no argument, and neither is the genetic fallacy acceptable, both arguments used elsewhere by Hill, when he makes much of the fact that various errorists advocated premillennialism,¹¹ such as the extremists at Münster, and that premillennialism was not universal in the

⁶ Ibid., quoting D. H. Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church*, 30, 41, 42. [uncertain as to which page has the quote in the text above]

⁷ Ibid, quoting Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity* (), 76., particularly Part II. Kentry says, "Charles E. Hill presents detailed evidence of "the nonadvocacy, and sometimes outspoken repudiation, of chiliasm" in several Apostolic Fathers including Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, Hermas and Second Clement, as well as the Apologists, Epistle to Diognetus, Melito of Sardis, Athenagora, the Christian Pseudepigrapha, early martyrologies, and others."

⁸ Ibid., quoting W. G. T. Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine*, Vol 2 (), 390-391.

⁹ Ibid., quoting Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Traditions*, Vol 1 (), 125.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Charles E. Hill, "Why the Early Church Finally Rejected Premillennialism," <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/751995/posts> (last visited November 30, 2010).

early Church and throughout much of Church history.

The comment of Shedd, that early millennialism was held most among Jewish converts, to Gentry, may be a negative, but to me, it may as easily be a positive. I believe that the reason why Jewish converts would have been attracted to premillennialism, relates to their similar understanding of Scripture as taught by the apostles, who were Jewish, and the Lord Jesus, also a Jew. The source of one's views, whether it be Jew or Greek, learned or unlearned, is not a reason for rejection of a view. One's theological position stands or falls on the argument, not some collateral concern. Though it is perfectly permissible to seek to discover the influences that guide the development of a viewpoint, like premillennialism, in order to understand better the reason for its development, whether it is correct or incorrect, however, is not dependent on the source.

Regarding the fact that many differed on the matter of eschatology in the early Church and that one particular view was did not ascend to creedal status is not a reason to reject premillennialism. There has been charity among theologians throughout Church history on a number of matters, such as mode of baptism, baptism of infants, questions relating to predestination and free will, not only eschatology, and the ability to discuss matters that are not essential to the nature of God and Christ, is a hallmark to celebrate, but it should not cause one to abandon a theological view one believes to be supported by the biblical text. The fact that the premillennial doctrine was not articulated in a creed is of no consequence: neither was any other eschatological view, nor many other doctrines that are true.

III. WHAT DOES ALEXANDRIA HAVE TO DO WITH ASIA MINOR? WHAT DOES ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION HAVE TO DO WITH THE MEANING OF SCRIPTURE?

Tertullian once questioned whether the Greek philosophical speculation had anything to do with Christian truth with his famous words, "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the Academy to do with the Church? What have heretics to do with Christians?"¹²

Our instruction comes from the porch of Solomon, who had himself taught that the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart. Away with all attempts to produce a Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic Christianity! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after receiving the gospel! When we believe, we desire no further belief. For this is our first article of faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.¹²

If premillennialism, in some form, was the primary view of the early Church, then what happened to bring it into disrepute among the Fathers, so that by the time of Augustine it had receded into the background?

¹² Tertullian, *Heretics*, 7 (Stevenson, 166-167). The entire quote is: "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the Academy to do with the Church? What have heretics to do with Christians? Our instruction comes from the porch of Solomon, who had himself taught that the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart. Away with all attempts to produce a Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic Christianity! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after receiving the gospel! When we believe, we desire no further belief. For this is our first article of faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides."

A. *Rejection of Chiliasm in the Second through Fourth Centuries of the Church*

The belief in a millennial reign of Christ for a thousand years (χιλία, Rev 20:2-3) continued throughout the ante-Nicene period but the resistance of certain theologians (such as Caius, Origen, Dionysius the Great, Eusebius, Jerome, Augustine) of the Church hampered this belief in certain sectors of the Church. When Augustine opposed the view,¹³ it was abandoned for most of the Church's history except for occasional outbreaks, until the 19th century.

Why were several leaders of the Christian Church opposed to the idea of Jesus reigning on the earth? Various reasons have been given for this.

1. Concern with heretical and extreme chiliasm

Chiliasm has been rejected by some because some who held to the view held either what was viewed to be extreme views of earthly pleasure and sensation during the millennium, or that these people also held to heretical opinions regarding cardinal truths of Christian faith.

“Unfortunately some were inclined to dwell fondly on their millennial hopes in a crassly materialistic manner, such as Papias whose fourth book details a vivid description of the millennial kingdom, in which the fruitfulness of the earth will be increased to staggering proportions for the sake of the risen saints. About the year 100 A.D., Cerinthus, an early Gnostic leader, wrote of the luxury and sensual delights he expected the millennium to hold.

In the fourth century, the great Christian thinker Augustine of Hippo, who has influenced all Latin theology, rejected the literal notions behind chiliasm, based on his disagreement with the materialistic notions which had come to be associated with it. Although Augustine originally held to chiliasm and still acknowledged it as a tenable view, he described what he found to be more preferable in chapter 20 of *De Civ Dei* (The City of God) written in 425 A.D. Augustine had fashioned a view where in contrast to chiliasm, the present age itself was the millennium. He perceived the kingdom of God as already manifest in the Church and proclaimed that the age between Pentecost and the return of Christ was the very millennium itself, marked by the ever increasing influence of the Church in overturning evil in the world before Christ's return. One can readily understand how this view might have arisen, given the dramatic change in the affairs of the Church after Constantine's Edict of Toleration early in the fourth century. In fact, later Latin theology had a widespread tendency to identify the Kingdom of God, at least in its first stage of existence, with the institutional Catholic Church.

After the year 1,000 A.D. the thought of a literal thousand year period faded; Augustine's post-millennialist construction became instead amillennialism, the Biblical "thousand years" being merely figurative. Indeed, during the Middle Ages the thought of a literal millennium was generally regarded as heretical. Amillennialism is still taught in schools of thought such as that represented by Westminster Theological Seminary.”¹⁴

St. Augustine had originally been a chiliast and apparently did not reject it entirely

¹³ The primary difficulty that Augustine had was with the idea that Christ's reign would last only a thousand years, rather than it being eternal. To him this was contrary to the creeds of the Church and the teaching of Scripture that Messiah's rule would be forever.

¹⁴ David M. Williams, *The Millennium and the Early Church*, <http://www.tpub.com/religion/bible%20prophecy/millennium/> (last visited December 1, 2010).

as an unacceptable view, if held in some moderation:

This opinion [a future literal millennium after the resurrection] might be allowed, if it proposed only spiritual delight unto the saints during this space (and we were once of the same opinion ourselves); but seeing the avouchers hereof affirm that the saints after this resurrection shall do nothing but revel in fleshly banquets, where the cheer shall exceed both modesty and measure, this is gross and fit for none but carnal men to believe. But they that are really and truly spiritual do call those of this opinion Chiliasts.¹⁵

One major problem with discounting a theological view of another person due to him holding to a heretical view is that this would discount the recognized orthodoxy of large numbers of persons in Church history, not to mention contemporary persons and groups. For example, Origen held a mixture of orthodox and heterodox perspectives, as did Cerinthus. Certain cults today hold orthodox doctrines in concert with the orthodox Church, even though failing in some doctrines. Their error does not undercut what is true.

2. *Focus on spiritual heaven rather than an earthly kingdom*

The Scripture is not entirely clear on the nature of our existence after death. Even if it is true that we are immediately in the presence of Christ at death, consideration must be given to the need for the spirit and body to be reunited in the resurrection, and that the spiritual body is NOT a spirit-body, but the SAME fleshly body in which we die being raised incorruptible and immortal, empowered by the Spirit. Origen's belief that the physical world and physical body was being set aside to enjoy a non-physical existence gave rise to his rejection of an earthly kingdom. Whatever is the truth about a millennium, the new heavens and earth will be physical in nature in which we as physical beings will enjoy for eternity.

5. *Abandonment of consistent literal interpretation and adoption of allegorism*

The departure from the first century rabbinic and apostolic literal interpretative approach to Scripture is a substantial part of the demise of premillennialism in the post-Nicene Church, having begun in the third century with Clement of Alexandria and Origen. This was in contrast to the premillennial (either dispensational or historic) discernable in the Church Fathers of the ante-Nicene period, one finds a small, but eventually dominant amillennial perspective.

We need to look briefly at the development of Jewish and Christian allegorism. The city of Alexandria in the first century of the Christian era had approximately 200,000 Jews, a third of the population of the city. It was the most important Greek city of the empire and an intellectual metropolis during the time of Clement of Alexandria, the teacher of Origen.¹⁶ The Hellenization of the Mediterranean world, and parts of the Ancient Near East, invaded Egypt as well, bringing with it the power of the Greek language, so that it is in this city that the Septuagint had been done, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. But Hellenism brought not only the Greek language and culture but also Greek philosophical ideas, expressed possibly most fully by Philo, the foremost Jewish philosopher/theologian of the first century. He desired to wed Greek philosophy

¹⁵ 27. Augustine. *City of God*, XX, p. 7

¹⁶ Thomas Cornman, "The Development of Third-Century Hermeneutical Views in Relation to Eschatological Systems," *JETS* 30/3 (Sept 1987), 280-81 (279-288).

and the Hebrew theology and attempted to do this by the method of allegorical interpretation,¹⁷ whereby mundane and problematic portions of the Bible were understood in more significant ways, in deeper meanings than was obvious by a normal reading of the text. Even as allegory in Hellenistic interpretation solved problematic exploits of the gods, Philo used allegory to solve distasteful portions of the Old Testament, such as Lot's sex with his daughters, polygamy among the patriarchs, etc.¹⁸ In the words of Paul Tan, "Allegorism enabled the Alexandrian Jews to make Moses speak the beautiful philosophy of Plato and other Greek sages."¹⁹ Cornman elucidates further, "It is evident that he was part of the Hellenizing movement of the Jews of the Diaspora, who were attempting to show that their faith was not as barbarous as the Greeks might think."²⁰

Christians in Alexandria were equally influenced by the Greek method of interpretation and reveals his Platonic dependence in his works. He became the disciple and colleague of Pantaenus, and later his successor as head of the Catechetical School of Alexandria. Similar to Philo, Clement desired to convince Gentile non-Christians that

. . . God gave the Law to the Jews, so he gave philosophy to the Greeks--as an instrument to lead them to Christ. God's eternal Word (Logos) was the source of both. Clement believed the truth was to be found in Scripture, but sometimes it was hidden, and could only be discovered through **allegorical interpretation**. Clement did insist, however, that the Scriptures had a literal, historical sense--a primary meaning--that had to be respected. But allegorical reading could find further, "spiritual" meanings containing universal and eternal truths, an idea reflecting Plato.²¹

Clement, in turn, had a brilliant student named Origen, one of the most brilliant scholars of antiquity, albeit one of the most troubled. Schaff calls Origen "the greatest scholar of his age, and the most gifted, most industrious, and most cultivated of all the ante-Nicene fathers"²² but that his "great defect" was the neglect of the grammatical and historical sense and his constant desire to find a hidden mystic meaning" in the biblical text."²³

Like his teacher Clement, who had high regard for the inspiration of the Scripture, but sought to alleviate any difficulty by means of allegory, Origen sought to move beyond the plain, literal meaning of the text to deeper truths below the surface. He did

¹⁷ For a helpful discussion of allegory, see "The Allegorical Interpretation of the Scriptures," <http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/patrology/schoolofalex/1-Intro/chapter3.html> (last visited December 1, 2010). Also see the Bernard Ramm's discussion of allegorical interpretation in his classic *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: W. A. Wilde Company, 1956), 24-45.

¹⁸ Mal Couch, "The Allegorists Who Undermined the Normal Interpretation of Scripture," class notes for An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics.

¹⁹ Paul Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Rockville, MD: Assurance, 1988), 47, quoted in Couch.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 281.

²¹ "The Allegorical Interpretation of the Scriptures," <http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/patrology/schoolofalex/1-Intro/chapter3.html> (last visited December 1, 2010).

²² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910, reprinted 1995), 790, quoted in D. Matthew Allen, *Theology Adrift: The Early Church Fathers & Their Views of Eschatology*, <http://bible.org/article/theology-adrift-early-church-fathers-and-their-views-eschatology> (last visited December 1, 2010).

²³ *Ibid.*, 799.

this by adducing three levels of meaning: 1) the historical sense, useful for the simple mind; 2) the moral sense that instructed the will; and lastly 3) the spiritual sense that revealed the great teachings of the Christian faith.²⁴

Regarding eschatology, both Clement of Alexandria and Origen found what he viewed as stringent literalism as being inadequate to delve into the deeper meanings of Scripture. Regarding chiliasm, the emphasis on the carnal (fleshy) appetites of the future period of earthly bliss for resurrected beings proved too much for Origen, namely, eating and drinking, and even sexual relationships for bearing of children among the inhabitants of the earth.

This method guided Origen also in his views of eschatology, including the nature of the resurrection body, as well as the nature of the second coming and future life. Rather than the plain reading of the text Origen saw other theological truths. For example, he “rejected the popular Christian hope of the coming earthly millennial reign of Jesus. . . . He wrote, in fact, that Christ’s coming in the clouds, as described in Matthew 24:30, referred to the Lord’s coming into the souls of the openhearted when they accepted the basic truths of doctrine.”²⁵

McGiffert gives the sense of Origen’s teaching:

Origen had an elaborate eschatology. He believed in or at least hoped for the final restoration of all rational creatures, not only men but also demons, including even the archfiend himself. The pains of hell are disciplinary in purpose and will be temporary only, not everlasting. When the present world has come to an end the material substance of which it is composed will be employed for the formation of another world in which the spirits of men not yet perfected will be still further disciplined and so it will go on until all have been redeemed when matter being unredeemable will finally be destroyed. The future life will be a life of the spirit; the flesh will have no part in it. The joys of heaven and the pains of hell will be mental not material.²⁶

Probably more than any other person, Origen was influential in beginning the shift from a premillennial eschatology to the amillennial model. If Origen was the primary root of the spiritualization or allegorizing of Scripture, Augustine was the capstone. He went beyond Origen’s three-fold approach to a four-fold one: 1) literal; 2) allegorical; 3) moral; and 4) analogical.²⁷ Later in life, Stanton suggests, Augustine reverted back to a more historical and doctrinal view of interpretation, except for prophecy,²⁸ possibly influenced by the Antiochian school of interpretation, according to Dockery, by its two hermeneutical giants, Theodore of Mopsuestia and John Chrysostom.²⁹

Typological interpretation should be distinguished from allegorical, in that allegory sees a meaning that is under, and different from, the plain, literal meaning of the text.

²⁴ Ibid., 284.

²⁵ Couch.

²⁶ A. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Scribner's, 1946), 231.

²⁷ Dockery, *Christian Scripture* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 122, quoted in Allen, <http://bible.org/article/theology-adrift-early-church-fathers-and-their-views-eschatology> (last visited December 1, 2010).

²⁸ Allen, quoting Gerald Stanton, *Kept From the Hour* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Publishing, 4th ed. 1991), 148.

²⁹ Ibid.

Dockery explains,

Chrysostom and the Antiochene school distinguished allegorical interpretation from typological in two primary ways. Typological interpretation attempted to seek out patterns in the Old Testament to which Christ corresponded, while allegorical exegesis depended on accidental similarity of language between two passages. Second, typological interpretation depended on a historical interpretation of the text. The passage, according to the Antiochenes, had only one meaning, the literal, and not two as suggested by the allegorists.³⁰

6. *Jewish Understanding of Chiliasm*

The literal nature of the future events, and certain aspects of the Messianic kingdom found throughout the prophets, was taught by the apostles, and apparently even expected by them at the time that Jesus ascended back to heaven (Acts 1). A major negative aspect of chiliasm in the minds of some scholars who minimize the premillennialism is that the fathers were influenced by Judaism, Jewish thought and interpretation, or writings that Jews relied upon such as 1 Enoch, etc. Thus, it is argued, chiliasts have departed from the less literal understanding of the kingdom as taught by Jesus and the apostles. This similarity is not a weakness but a strength, for Jesus and the apostles understood the OT text in a plain literal (not ignoring figures of speech) manner rather than the allegorical and spiritualized way in which some Alexandrian Christians who were influenced by Philo did.

The earthly nature of Messiah's kingdom was existent at least by 100 B.C., and is found at Qumran, even as aspects of the death and resurrection of Messiah.³¹ One finds that the Essenes understood the Scriptures similar to what is recorded in the apostolic preaching of the Christ, and that they both understood the Old Testament in certain aspects of the biblical text as it is presented in the popular Book of Enoch. Though there are differences between Enoch, the Old Testament prophets, and the Revelation of John, they all affirm a time of future earthly blessing connected to the Messianic age.

2 Esdras is a post-A.D. 70 book that attempted to explain the destruction of Jerusalem, in which a presentation of a future temporary Messianic kingdom will be established. It includes discussion of resurrection and judgment.

2 Baruch also has references to the Messiah and a earthly, but it is different in that there is a millennial kingdom, a final judgment, and then an everlasting kingdom. There is also reference to the destruction of a wicked one by the Messiah.

Lactantius refers to the Sibylline Oracles, and writes about a period of six thousand years, and a time of rest and blessing at the end of the six thousand year period when wickedness would be destroyed and righteousness would reign for a thousand years.

There is no reason to reject collateral Jewish interpretations of Old Testament imagery and theology, often which is adopted by the New Testament authors, particularly in the teaching and life of Jesus in His first and second coming.

7. *Triumphalism in Fourth Century Christianity*

³⁰ Dockery, 115, quoted in Allen.

³¹ See H. Wayne House, "The Basis in Pre-Christian Judaism and the Hebrew Scriptures For the Apostolic Preaching of the Death and Resurrection of the Messiah" (unpublished paper).

The conversion of Emperor Constantine was an unexpected but joyous event for the early Christians. They moved from persecution to exaltation. Whereas Christians looked for the soon coming of Christ to remove them from the wrath of Rome, they now enjoyed Rome's favor. This caused many to begin to reorient themselves to the new reality so that a time of peace and blessedness seemed to be provided by this new relationship with the kingdom of the world. Note the words of Cairns,

The more prosperous circumstances of the church, ushered in by the freedom of religion granted by Constantine in the Edict of Milan in 313 and his favouritism to the church by state subsidies, exemption of the clergy from public duty and military service, and the legal setting of Sunday as a day of rest, caused many Christians to cease thinking of the Roman state as Antichrist or his forerunner and to expect that the social and territorial expansion of the church since Christ's First Advent was the kingdom. The church became at home in the world as members gained material possession and prominence, such as Eusebius enjoyed in being at the right hand of Constantine at the Council of Nicaea. Eusebius wrote a laudatory biography of Constantine and in his *Ecclesiastical History* sought to present the story of the church from Christ's Ascension to her present rise to prominence. The earlier church fathers, such as Papias, who had held to a premillennial hope were castigated for their errors. Church and state were two arms of God to serve Him in His developing kingdom. Jerome insisted that the saints would not have an earthly premillennial kingdom and wrote: 'Then let the story of the thousand years cease'. (*Commentary on Daniel*, 7:25).³²

4. *The Arguments of Charles E. Hill*

One of the more novel approaches to explain the reason for the demise of chiliasm in the post-Nicene period, as well as the alleged defective nature of chiliasm in the ante-Nicene period, has been offered by Charles E. Hill in his book *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*,³³ his theses deserving a special treatment, albeit short, with a longer analysis to be offered at another time. This interaction is the summation of his views offered in his paper "Why the Early Church Finally Rejected Premillennialism."³⁴

Hill contends that various reasons often given for the eventual demise of premillennialism as a dominant, or even non-heretical theological view, such as association with heretical groups such as Montanism, the rise of allegorism, the influence of Augustine, and the blending of the Church with the Empire after the Edict of Milan are illegitimate reasons.³⁵ He discounts the accepted position among most historians of Church History that premillennialism was the dominant eschatology passed down from the post-apostolic times through men like Papias, Justin, Irenaeus and Hippolytus, ultimately from John the apostle and author of the Apocalypse.³⁶

³² Earle E. Cairns, *Eschatology and Church History, Part I* (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, April 1958), p. 141, quoted in Vaterlaus, "Amillennialism vs Premillennialism," <http://www.rapturenotes.com/amillennialism.html> (last visited December 1, 2010).

³³ Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001 2nd ed.).

³⁴ Charles E. Hill, "Why the Early Church Finally Rejected Premillennialism," http://www.preteristarchive.com/dEmEnTiA/1996_hill_fathers-rejected-premill.html

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Hill contends that positing a conflict between literal interpretation and allegorism as a cause for the difference between chiliasm is “overly simplistic,”³⁷ and that both sides of the eschatological debate used a literal and allegorical method of interpretation.³⁸ Moreover, Hill avers that Origen’s concerns with chiliasm was besides his allegorical method, and was concerned with “real theological and traditional motivations.”³⁹ He also says that apart from the aid of Augustine, chiliasm was near extinction by the time that he wrote his *City of God* in A.D. 420-426.

Dismissing many of the reasons that premillennialists have argued that gave rise to demise of the historic and apostolic view, Hill offers his own rationale for its failure to survive, as well as its theological flaw. The error of premillennialism, in his view, relates to chiliasts committing the Jewish error, by which he means, not merely being Jewish and not adopting anti-Semitism. Instead, he refers to the belief that the kingdom of God would be restored to ethnic Jews in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham and his descendants. He argues that the belief that the Church became the recipient of the Old Testament promises and the true Israel was engrained in Christian theology in early Christianity, so that a Jewish fulfillment was inconceivable to most. He argues that early Christians rejected chiliasm because it was sub-Christian, not properly recognizing the complete redemptive implications of Christ’s first coming.

Hill sees evidence of this sub-Christian view in three ways in chiliasm. First, allegedly chiliasts based their view on non-Christian Jewish sources rather than traditions and writings of the apostles. He claims, for example, that Papias said he received his teaching from St. John, when, in reality, the teaching came from the Jewish work, *2 Baruch*. Again, Justin is said to have based his perspective of the one-thousand years on Revelation 20, whereas it is more likely derived from a particular form of exegesis of Isaiah 65:17-25, in line with his Jewish opponent Trypho.

Second, the chiliasts belief in an earthly kingdom related to their view of the afterlife, in which the souls of the righteous awaited, in a subterranean Hades, the resurrection of their bodies to live in a physical, earthly paradise, rather than being ushered at death into the presence of Christ. The belief in this intermediate state of existence, he says, was based on their chiliasm. This is said to be different from most of the Church, who believed, in accordance with the New Testament teaching, the immediate entrance at death into the presence of God in heaven. The teaching of Revelation, consequently, allegedly refers to the present era in which the righteous death are participating with Jesus in the heavenly kingdom.

Hill believes that chiliasm fits in with Justin’s supposed desire to capture all of the Jewish inheritance for Christians, and for Irenaeus’ attempt to emphasize the goodness of the material creation against his Gnostic opponents.

Chiliasm, according to Hill, was at odds with the clear teaching of the New Testament handed over by the apostles.

Last of all, supposedly chiliasm was at great odds, and even “scandalous,” with the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

biblical teaching regarding the reason for the death of Jesus. If it is correct, then the Jews rejected Jesus because He failed to fulfill the literal and national words of the prophets, namely, to be the Messiah anticipated in Jewish circles based on the Old Testament.⁴⁰ The conclusion to Hill's study brings this application:

Modern premillennialism, in its several forms, has indeed undergone certain transmutations from its ancient ancestor, some of which are improvements, some arguably not. It may be possible to develop a premillennialism which obviates the worst of chiliasm's pitfalls in antiquity. But the more challenging question will always be whether any form of chiliasm can ever be shown to be the view of the New Testament writers.⁴¹

How shall we respond to Hill's dismissal of standard reasons for the demise of premillennialism in the later centuries of the Church, and his indictment of premillennialism's faulty, if not heretical, *raison d'être*? He has certainly offered an interesting and creative new approach to the debate on early premillennialism, but also unconvincing, if not contrived, argument based on a number of misconceptions and assumptions. Let me address each of his arguments seriatim.

The fact that chiliasm was non-existent or dormant for a millennium is not particularly significant to its truthfulness, as the doctrines recovered in the Reformation demonstrate. Uncovering biblical truth that has been generally hidden in the Church is always the call of the biblical Christian, and that Reformers such as Luther or Calvin did not approve of chiliasm does not say anything about their worth or truthfulness, because they failed to properly resurrect biblical teaching on baptism, the Lord's Supper, ecclesiastical structure that many find unbiblical today. Their eschatological deficiency, in my view, does not detract from their important advances in theology, but had they had a consistent hermeneutic in regards to prophecy, they would have had a more biblical view.

Hill discounts the legitimacy of reasons for the demise of premillennialism, which I will not cover in any depth at this point since it is discussed elsewhere in the paper. His claim that premillennialism was not the major view during the early centuries of the Church simply is not supportable unless he focuses on the post-Nicene period. The standard comments of men like Schaff (not a premillennialist), and recent studies by Crutchfield, Ice, and Turner, provides compelling evidence, beyond a reasonable doubt, that this was the predominant view (though not necessarily dispensational, or at least in every respect) of the Church Fathers until the time of Constantine and Augustine. There is little need in this paper simply to make the exact same arguments and give the same evidence found in their works.

I find his minimization of the impact of allegory on the reason for the rise of non-chiliasm eschatology to be puzzling. In fact, this is one of the major reasons for the problem since how one interprets the biblical text (Old and New), as well as the obvious great divide between the theologians of Asia Minor and Alexandria in the late first century, second, third, and fourth centuries is quite clear from the quotes of the Fathers, as well as the attribution of Eusebius, et al, who were not in sympathy with chiliasm. Moreover, the division between the schools of exegesis and interpretation at Antioch and

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Alexandria is pronounced. Though Hill criticizes the conclusions of chiliasts about an earthly rule of Christ for a thousand years (while not denying an eternal heavenly reign), the real problems are found with Origen and Augustine, the former for false views of the resurrection, and the latter (as well as Eusebius) for confusing the kingdom of God with the Roman Empire.

Now to the two reasons that Hill believes are responsible for the failure of chiliasm. I give him kudos for recognizing that the Jewish people did well in preserving the Scriptures, but fault him for believing that they had so little understanding of the Bible they produced through the prophets of Israel, and particularly for those Jews who embraced Jesus as Messiah and Savior. A large number of Jews certainly made some mistakes in biblical interpretation, expecting only a King to rid them of the Romans and set up Jerusalem and the Jewish people in fulfillment of the prophecies, rather than the suffering Messiah. Moreover, non-Christian Jews, like Trypho, Justin's opponent rejected the idea of a second coming of Messiah. Hill, and others who embrace a non-chiliasm view, equally fail to see a distinction between the role of the Messiah as the fulfiller of Old Testament biblical covenants in a literal manner, something understood by Jesus, the apostles, and many of the chiliasts of which he is critical. It is not clear that the early Fathers saw themselves as the true Israel, in contrast to ethnic Israel. Even Justin is the first to use such a term, and only once. It is later that this perspective began to take hold, possibly a contributing factor to the rise of historic premillennialism, and probably due to the seeming destruction of the Jewish people and Jerusalem after the A.D. 70 and A.D. 135 destruction of Jerusalem, the temple, and expulsion of Jews from Jerusalem by Hadrian.

What about Hill's first contention that chiliasts used non-biblical or non-Christian sources for their theology? Do we mean like Jude who quotes from the Jewish sources Book of Enoch and Assumption of Moses, or even Paul who quotes from Greek poets and philosophers on the Areopagus? In a paper that I did on the death and resurrection of the Messiah in extra-canonical sources at Qumran, the Jewish, particularly the Essenes, and especially in the Book of Enoch, one finds glimpses of the Messiah that are found in New Testament books. Jesus and the apostles read the same Hebrew Scriptures as the Essenes and the author(s) of the Book of Enoch, so we should not be surprised that they came to some of the same conclusions. It is instructive that Peter did not have to convince his audience that the Messiah would be raised but that Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecy. So what if 2 Baruch presents a millennial view of Messiah's earthly reign relied on by early chiliasts? It is in agreement with Isaiah's view of the future blossoming of the earth during Messiah's rule. So what that Justin relied on Isaiah 65:17-25 for his words about a future earthly reign of Christ rather than John in the Apocalypse? Must every aspect of theology be stated in each portion of the Bible for it to be believed?

His second concern with early chiliasm is that chiliasts held to an intermediate state rather than entering into the presence of Christ. I must say that I have not thoroughly studied this point, so I must be tentative in my conclusions. Nonetheless, there is clearly such a view in the Old Testament, and the New Testament is not all that clear on exactly what happens at death. The resurrection of the fleshly body of the believer is theologically sound, and certainly better than Origen's view of a "spiritual" body (emphasis on spiritual) that is not really physical. Origen's view is a heresy. Much

ancient and contemporary discussion of heaven in reality refers to the new heavens and earth rather than some supra-physical existence after death. Our hope is the resurrection and not some intangible existence apart from our bodies. Even if the early chiliasts were wrong in their view of the place where Christians reposed after death, this does not make chiliasm wrong, because they also held to the view from their understanding of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the traditions of the apostles handed down, as is found in the words of Papias and Justin and the exegesis of Irenaeus and others.

The last charge against ancient chiliasm is that such a belief would have provided a wrong reason to crucify Jesus. Surely reading the Gospel accounts reveals that Jesus did present Himself in a customary way as the Son of David, namely, riding on a donkey into Jerusalem, being a miracle worker, not to mention His fulfillments of Davidic prophecies in His place and manner of birth. One of the criticisms of His opponents was that He could not be the Messiah because this would require Him to be born in Bethlehem. That He did not fulfill prophecies, in their knowledge of Jesus, was a reason to reject Him. Christ demonstrated His understanding of the difference of His first and second coming when He addressed the congregation at the synagogue in Nazareth. He did not read the entire portion of Isaiah 61 given to Him that included the day of God's vengeance that Messiah would fulfill. They expected Messiah to fulfill both portions in His coming but Jesus knew of His two comings.

Though I must give more work to analyze Hill's work in this area, my first impression is to find his study providing some interesting points, but inadequate to explain all of the evidence regarding the nature, cause, and reasons for demise of chiliasm in the patristic period.

IV. ITS ALL ABOUT HERMENEUTICS. . .WELL ALMOST!

What's it all about? Why did premillennialism arise and why did it largely go out of existence in the patristic period? How the prophets of Israel, the people who read them in the days immediately before and during the life of Jesus among the Jewish people, the particular interpretative methods of the apostles as they dealt with the Old Testament texts, the traditions they handed down, and the faithfulness of the disciples of the apostles and their disciples—all of this gave rise to the development of premillennialism. The faithfulness to this understanding also kept premillennialism alive and its components accurate. When a departure from the teaching of Scripture and the traditions of the apostles occurred, due to theological and political factors at the time, then it failed.

What sees early in the gospel accounts that there was an expectation of the Messiah. The words of the prophetess Anna and priest Simeon speak to this. Even the words of the angel Gabriel that the one to be born of a virgin (in fulfillment of prophecy) would save His people from their sins. This clearly spoke of Israel, though allowed for many more. The one coming was the Son of David according to Matthew and the cries of the crowds as He rode into Jerusalem.

All of the prophecies about Jesus that we see fulfilled in His earthly life were literally fulfilled, so why would we expect the Old Testament to now be interpreted in an allegorical or "spiritual" way. Neither the Jews of the time nor the apostles understood it that way. This is why they wondered if He would know bring the kingdom to Israel.

Their timing was off, as was the Jews in general, but not the understanding of the event.

Early Christians understood the importance of Israel in the plan of God. God would not forsake His covenant, and though the Gentile had been grafted to the natural branch, the Jew still gave life to the Gentile and, in the words of Paul, “all Israel will be saved.” When Paul gave admonition to the Corinthians, he reminded them that the word of the Lord did not start with them; it came from Jerusalem. It was in Jerusalem that the apostolic word came and judgment was given in Acts 15.

What was the reason that the Christians in Alexandria, and those infected and affected by them, departed from premillennialism whereas others from Asia Minor, and those impacted by them, were premillennial? Larry Crutchfield deals with this in his article *The Apostle John and Asia Minor As A Source Of Premillennialism in the Early Church Fathers*.⁴² The influence of St. John spread through his disciples (such as Papias, Polycarp), and those who influenced them (such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus et al). His understanding of the Old Testament, his method of hermeneutics, his absorption of the teachings of Jesus was transmitted to theologians, apologists, and Church leaders throughout Asia Minor (and elsewhere) for centuries. While the Church looked to the Scriptures and the apostolic word, it remained true to the premillennial understanding of eschatology but when its eyes strayed to philosophies contrary to Scripture, as well as social and cultural events and changes, it strayed. The same can be said for us today!

⁴² Larry V. Crutchfield, “The Apostle John and Asia Minor As A Source Of Premillennialism in the Early Church Fathers,” *JETS* 31/4 (December 1988), 411-427.