

The MILLENNIAL WEEK

In Early Christian Eschatology

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The earliest post-Apostolic Christian writers, whose eschatology can be determined with certainty,¹ consistently held to Chiliasm.² These men lived contiguous with the age of the Apostles. Some of them were personally instructed by the Apostles and others who had seen the Lord. They were the early apologists for the Christian Faith, fiercely attacking and overthrowing the emerging Christian-Gnostic cults that sprang up like tares among the wheat. They took seriously the warning of Jude to “*earnestly contend for the Faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.*” Their weapons were the sacred Scriptures and the Apostolic oral traditions preserved by the elders within all the churches personally founded by the Apostles.³

Below is a sampling of the uniform Chiliasm of the earliest Christian writers. I have included only the quotes that specifically mention the belief in the Millennial Week, that God’s dealings with man under the curse will extend for 6 millennia to be followed by Christ’s and the Saints’ millennial reign on the earth, the “Sabbath Rest.”

¹ Amillennialists often count all of the early writers whose surviving works do not specifically endorse Chiliasm as being opposed to it. This is simply not true, nor is it a fair handling of their writings. All that can be fairly said of the earliest writers from the century after the Apostles is that many of them specifically endorsed Chiliasm, while some did not mention it. We have no clear examples of any first or second century writers opposing Chiliasm, or offering any theological points which conflict with Chiliasm. There is absolutely no evidence that non-Chiliast Christians held any offices in the orthodox churches. In fact, the interpretive methods employed by today’s Amillennialists were strongly condemned by Irenaeus and others, and were attributed to Gnosticism, the enemy of Christianity. Justin called the opponents of Chiliasm “heretics,” and indicated that they denied the resurrection of the body, which was a cardinal tenet of the Apostolic Faith as evidenced by the Apostles’ Creed, (first recorded in writing by Hippolytus). It includes, “*I believe ... in the resurrection of the flesh*” (σαρκος αναστασιν).

² CHILIASM is the Greek word for “millennialism,” and refers to the earliest Christian eschatology. Chiliasm was similar to premillennialism in seeing a future millennium after the second coming, when Christ will reign over the whole earth from Jerusalem which will be restored. However, it differs from dispensational pretribulationism in that it sees Christians as part of God’s single program for Israel and the nations outlined in the prophecies of the Old Testament, with Gentile Christians being grafted into Israel and the unbelieving portion of Israel being cut off. Consequently, the promises to Abraham and his SEED (who is Christ and all who are baptized into Him, according to Gal. 3:16-29), of the permanent inheritance of the Promised Land (from the Nile to the Euphrates rivers) is for resurrected Christians as well as the saints of Israel. (This is in opposition to dispensationalism’s “heavenly destiny” concept for the Church while the Promised Land is allocated to national Israel). Also, a major component of Chiliasm was the belief in the Millennial Week, that God’s dealings with man under the curse was limited to 6 millennia, with the reign of Christ over the nations being the 7th millennium, the Sabbath Rest.

³ See: Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk I, ch. x; Bk. III, ch. iii-iv; Bk. III, ch. xii; Bk. V, preface & ch. xxxiii;

Clement⁴ (AD, 30-100) & Justin⁵ (AD, 110-165)

“And the fact that it was not said of the seventh day equally with the other days, ‘And there was evening, and there was morning,’ is a distinct indication of the consummation which is to take place in it before it is finished, as the fathers declare, especially St. Clement, and Irenaeus, and Justin the martyr and philosopher.”⁶

Papias⁷ (AD. 70-155)

“Taking occasion from Papias of Hierapolis, the illustrious, a disciple of the apostle who leaned on the bosom of Christ, and Clemens, and Pantaenus ... of the Alexandrians, and the wise Ammonius, the ancient and first expositors [of Scripture], who agreed with each other, who understood the work of the six days as referring to Christ and the whole Church.”⁸

Barnabas⁹ (AD. 100?)

“‘And God made in six days the works of His hands, and made an end on the seventh day, and rested on it, and sanctified it.’ Attend, my children, to the meaning of this expression, ‘He finished in six days.’ This implieth that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with Him a thousand years. And He Himself testifieth, saying, ‘Behold, today will be as a thousand years.’ Therefore, my children, in six days, that is, in six thousand years, all things will be finished. ‘And He rested on the seventh day.’ This meaneth: when His Son, coming [again], shall destroy the time of the wicked

⁴ Clement of Rome knew the Apostle Paul, being called by him a “fellow worker” in Phil. 4:3 (Eusebius, History, Book III, ch. iv)

⁵ Justin was a former philosopher. After his conversion in the early 2nd century, he became the father of Christian apologetics, defending the Apostolic Faith to Jew, Greeks, and Romans.

⁶ Justin, Frag. XV, Comments by Anastasius

⁷ Papias was one of the Apostle John’s students. He was a bishop in the church at Hierapolis while John lived at Ephesus (just a few miles to the north) after his release from Patmos. Papias also had personal contact with others who had heard Jesus teach. He wrote a great deal about Chiliasm. Unfortunately, all of his original works are lost. All that remains are references to him and quotations from his works by later writers.

⁸ Fragments of Papias, IX

⁹ Early Christian writers attributed this Epistle to Barnabas, Paul’s companion (see: Tertullian, On Modesty, ch. xx; Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, Bk II, ch. xx). It was held in extremely high regard, so much so, that it was included along with the inspired New Testament books in some early Christian copies of the Scriptures (e.g. Codex Sinaiticus). In general, the book seems to have been written to counter the Judaizing tendencies by Jewish Christians. One striking feature of this epistle is its clear dependence on the book of Hebrews, using very similar arguments and terminology. As we will demonstrate in later chapters, Chiliasm itself seems to have been rooted primarily in the teaching of the 4th chapter of Hebrews.

man, and judge the ungodly, and change the-sun, and the moon, and the stars, then shall He truly rest on the seventh day.”¹⁰

Irenaeus:¹¹ (AD. 120-202)

“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 follow 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.”¹²

“[He gives this] as a summing up of the whole of that apostasy which has taken place during six thousand years.¹³ “For in as many days as this world was made, in so many thousand years shall it be concluded. And for this reason the Scripture says: ‘Thus the heaven and the earth were finished, and all their adornment. And God brought to a conclusion upon the sixth day the works that He had made; and God rested upon the seventh day from all His works.’ This is an account of the things formerly created, as also it is a prophecy of what is to come. For the day of the Lord is as a thousand years; and in six days created things were completed: it is evident, therefore, that they will come to an end at the sixth thousandth year ... the whole apostasy of six thousand years,¹ and unrighteousness, and wickedness, and false prophecy, and deception; for which things’ sake a cataclysm of fire shall also come [upon the earth].”¹⁴

“These are [to take place] in the times of the kingdom, that is, upon the seventh day, which has been sanctified, in which God rested from all the works which He created, which is the true Sabbath of the righteous, which they shall not be engaged in any earthly

¹⁰ Epistle of Barnabas, XV

¹¹ Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp, who was a student of John. Polycarp was bishop of the Church in Smyrna, most likely when Jesus dictated the letter to Smyrna contained in Rev. 2. Jesus had no criticism, only praise for the faithfulness of this church. His prophetic exhortation to this church, “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. ... Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life,” (Rev. 2:10) was certainly heeded by Polycarp. He stood boldly and confidently on the pyre, without being bound to the stake, while he was burned to death for his faithfulness to Christ. His pupil, Irenaeus, carried on his master’s teachings and included some of them in his own works. Irenaeus also died for his faith along with many of the members of the church he pastored in Lyons, Gaul.

¹² Irenaeus, Bk. V, ch. xxx

¹³ The 6,000 years are counted from the fall of man, when the curse was put into force, and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden.

¹⁴ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. V, xxviii

occupation; but shall have a table at hand prepared for them by God, supplying them with all sorts of dishes.”¹⁵

Hippolytus:¹⁶ (AD. 170-236)

“And six thousand years must needs be accomplished, in order that the Sabbath may come, the rest, the holy day on which God rested from all His works. For the Sabbath is the type and emblem of the future kingdom of the saints, when they shall reign with Christ, when He comes from heaven, as John says in his Apocalypse. ‘For a day with the Lord is as a thousand years.’ Since, then, in six days God made all things, it follows that six thousand years must be fulfilled.”¹⁷

Commodianus:¹⁸ (AD. 240)

“Adam was the first who fell, and that he might shun the precepts of God, Belial was his tempter by the lust of the palm tree. And he conferred on us also what he did, whether of good or of evil, as being the chief of all that was born from him; and thence we die by his means, as he himself, receding from the divine, became an outcast from the Word. We shall be immortal when six thousand years are accomplished.”¹⁹

“This has pleased Christ, that the dead should rise again, yea, with their bodies; and those, too, whom in this world the fire has burned [martyrs], when six thousand years are completed,... Those who are more worthy, and who are begotten of an illustrious stem, and the men of nobility under the conquered Antichrist, according to God’s command living again in the world for a thousand years, ... They who make God of no account when the thousandth year is finished shall perish by fire, ...”²⁰

Cyprian:²¹ (AD. 200-258)

“It is an ancient adversary and an old enemy with whom we wage our battle: six thousand years are now nearly completed since the devil first attacked man.”²² All kinds of

¹⁵ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. V, xxxiii

¹⁶ Hippolytus was a student of Irenaeus, who was a student of Polycarp, who was a student of John. He was a presbyter and possibly bishop of the church in Rome. He was martyred about AD 236.

¹⁷ Hippolytus. On the Hexaëmeron, Or Six Days’ Work, Fragments from Commentaries on Various Books of Scripture

¹⁸ Commodianus was a bishop of a church in North Africa.

¹⁹ Commodianus, Christian Discipline, xxxv

²⁰ Commodianus, Instructions of Commodianus, lxxx

²¹ Cyprian was bishop of Carthage (N. Africa), and was martyred for his faith in AD 258.

*temptation, and arts, and snares for his overthrow, he has learned by the very practice of long years. If he finds Christ's soldier unprepared, if unskilled, if not careful and watching with his whole heart; he circumvents him if ignorant, he deceives him incautious, he cheats him inexperienced. But if a man, keeping the Lord's precepts, and bravely adhering to Christ, stands against him, he must needs be conquered, because Christ, whom that man confesses, is unconquered."*²³

Methodius:²⁴ (AD. 260-312)

*"For since in six days God made the heaven and the earth, and finished the whole world, and rested on the seventh day from all His works which He had made, and blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, so by a figure in the seventh month, when the fruits of the earth have been gathered in, we are commanded to keep the feast to the Lord [Feast of Tabernacles], which signifies that, when this world shall be concluded in the seventh thousand years, when God shall have completed the world, He shall rejoice in us. ... Then, when the appointed times shall have been accomplished, and God shall have ceased to form this creation, in the seventh month, the great resurrection-day, it is commanded that the Feast of our Tabernacles shall be celebrated to the Lord, of which the things said in Leviticus are symbols and figures."*²⁵

*"For I also, taking my journey, and going forth from the Egypt of this life, ... celebrate with Christ the millennium of rest, which is called the seventh day, even the true Sabbath."*²⁶

²² A few writers spoke of the 6,000 years as being nearly complete in their day. These writers thought that the Antichrist was about to appear, after which Christ would return. (Other writers, such as Irenaeus and Hippolytus, expected a considerable delay before Antichrist would appear). The error was based on their use of the Septuagint's erroneous ages of the patriarchs in the Genesis genealogies. The LXX has been systematically altered, adding 100 years per generation to most of the people mentioned when they had their child. The use of such calculations necessarily placed the end of the 6,000 years within a hundred or so years of some of the later writers.

²³ Cyprian, Treatise xi

²⁴ Methodius was a bishop of the churches of Olympus and Patara in Lycia (Asia Minor), and was martyred for the Faith in AD 312. He was an outspoken opponent and critic of Origen. The philosophical speculations and allegorical approach to Scripture made popular by Origen eventually led to the decline and eventual extinction of Chiliasm in Christianity. Origen was instrumental in making the heavenly destiny of Gnosticism the preferred hope of Christians, replacing Chiliasm's hope of the resurrection of the flesh and inheritance of the Promised Land as a permanent possession.

²⁵ Methodius, Discourse IX, ch. i

²⁶ Methodius, Discourse IX, ch. v

Lactantius:²⁷ (AD. 260-330)

“Therefore let the philosophers, who enumerate thousands of ages from the beginning of the world, know that the six thousandth year is not yet completed, and that when this number is completed the consummation must take place, and the condition of human affairs be remodeled for the better ... Therefore, since all the works of God were completed in six days, the world must continue in its present state through six ages, that is, six thousand years. ... And again, since God, having finished His works, rested the seventh day and blessed it, at the end of the six thousandth year all wickedness must be abolished from the earth, and righteousness reign for a thousand years; and there must be tranquility and rest from the labors which the world now has long endured. ... “For six thousand years have not yet been completed, and when this number shall be made up, then at length all evil will be taken away, that justice alone may reign.”²⁸

Victorinus: (AD. 300?)

“And in Matthew we read, that it is written Isaiah also and the rest of his colleagues broke the Sabbath — that that true and just Sabbath should be observed in the seventh millenary of years. Wherefore to those seven days the Lord attributed to each a thousand years; for thus went the warning: “In Thine eyes, O Lord, a thousand years are as one day.” Therefore in the eyes of the Lord each thousand of years is ordained, for I find that the Lord’s eyes are seven. Wherefore, as I have narrated, that true Sabbath will be in the seventh millenary of years, when Christ with His elect shall reign.”²⁹

“So great a cloud of witnesses” have testified to the eschatology handed down by the Apostles of Jesus Christ. They include all of the early writers who were personally instructed by the Apostles or by those who knew them personally. They include faithful martyrs of the early Church who paid for their faith with their own blood. And they include the earliest bishops of the local churches, into which the true Apostolic Faith had been deposited and entrusted. And these men all believed and taught the same thing – Chiliasm. The eventual overthrow of Chiliasm occurred after these men were dead, and the leadership of the early Church gradually fell into the hands of theologians who cared more about philosophy than maintaining the Apostolic tradition.

²⁷ Lactantius “boldly confessed the Faith amid the fires of the last and most terrible of the great persecutions” (editor of his works). Justin had written to the Roman Emperor in his day, defending Christianity and overthrowing the pagan gods of the Empire. Lactantius followed in Justin’s footsteps, writing to instruct the Emperor Constantine himself in the Christian Faith. He was a Christian teacher of great renown, being charged with the personal instruction of the Emperor Constantine’s son, Crispus.

²⁸ Lactantius, The Epitome of the Divine Institutes, LXX

²⁹ Victorinus, On the Creation of the World