

The Millennial Age (1)

The purpose of God which He formed in eternity past is to have the church as a corporate vessel to contain all that He is, to express Him in full, and to represent Him with His authority by reigning with Him on the earth (Gen. 1:26; Eph. 1:22-23; 3:10-11). The operation of God's economy for the fulfillment of His purpose began in eternity past in foreknowing, selecting, and predestinating us unto full salvation (1 Pet. 1:2; Eph. 1:4-5), and it continues throughout all the ages of creation in the history of God with man. In the ages of the patriarchs and the law in the Old Testament, God gained the people of Israel to be His personal treasure, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Exo. 19:5-6), and in the New Testament age He is working to save and regenerate sinners, raise up churches, and build up the Body of Christ for which His believers are perfected through the organic experience of sanctification, renewing, transformation, and conformation to the image of His Son (Rom. 3:24; 1 Pet. 1:3; Rom. 15:16; 12:2; 8:29). At the end of this age, God will gain a group of overcomers to be His bride, and with them He will return to the earth openly in glory (Rev. 19:7). Following this, He will usher in the millennial age, a period after the church age and before eternity future. This age will be a further period of time, gloriously long for rest and satisfaction and sufficiently long for the final accomplishment of God's economical work in the old creation. It will also be an age of reward for the overcoming believers and of discipline for the defeated believers who were not fully gained by the Lord, perfected, built up, and fruitful during the church age.

To the overcomers in the church in Ephesus, the Lord promised that they would eat of the tree of life as the particular enjoyment of Him as the life supply in the New Jerusalem in the coming millennial kingdom (2:7), and to the overcomers in the church in Laodicea, He promised that they would sit with Him on His throne to participate in His authority and be co-kings with Him in the kingdom (3:21). Moreover, the Lord charged the believers in the church in Smyrna to overcome by enduring trial for "ten days," a period of time that is full, yet brief (2:10; Dan. 1:12-14). This indicates that if we, the Lord's believers in the church age, overcome for the full, yet brief duration of our Christian life, we will be rewarded with the consummate enjoyment of Christ as our highest portion in the coming kingdom of one thousand years, and we will

reign with Him over all the nations of the earth. However, if we are not faithful to Him in this age and do not enjoy Him as our portion at the present time, we will be excluded from the bright glory of the kingdom and be disciplined by Him during that age. Thus, the thousand-year age of the kingdom is a subject that is both glorious in its hope and sobering in its prospect. Students of the Bible, however, also realize, that it is a matter that has been subject to diverse and various interpretations and applications.

The need for unfaithful believers to be perfected after the end of their course in the present life was the teaching of the apostles, and it was maintained by the earliest teachers in the church. By the fifth century, however, the light of this truth was obscured, and in its place even the great teachers of Christianity were formulating a view that later would develop into the heresy of purgatory. It was at this same time, and demonstrably in connection with the development of that heresy, that the belief in a literal millennial kingdom was replaced by an entirely different system. Thus, the loss and recovery of the proper teaching of the reward and punishment of the believers is bound to the history of millennial beliefs, which is the subject of this article and its continuation in the subsequent issue of this journal. As we shall see, a proper understanding of the thousand years requires definite scriptural keys, which solve many problems and answer many questions.¹

The Consummation of the Ages

It has been wrongly asserted that Revelation 20:1-6 is the sole passage of Scripture that speaks of the one-thousand-year kingdom. In fact, many references are made to the future kingdom age in both the Old and New Testaments. Revelation 20 is, however, the unique mention of the actual duration of the future kingdom, and because of this it is the center of most discussion on the subject of chiliasm (from *χίλια ἔτη*, a thousand years), or millennialism (from *mille anni*). A brief overview of the sequence of Revelation is necessary to place this passage in its context. At the beginning of the prophecy of this book, the Son of Man charges John to write "the things which you have seen and the things which are and the things which are about to take place after these things" (1:19). "The

things which you have seen” consist of the seven golden lampstands—the shining churches, the Son of Man—the living Christ, and the seven stars—the bright messengers of the churches (vv. 9-20). “The things which are” are the seven local churches of chapters 2 and 3. “The things which are about to take place” is the subject of most of the remainder of the book. The first section of this long portion, from 4:1 to 11:19, gives a general view of the things to come, from Christ’s ascension to eternity future, including the scene around the throne in the heavens, the seven seals, and the seven trumpets. The second section, from 12:1 to 22:5, gives details of the important things and the crucial matters covered in the first section: a woman who brings forth a man-child, a great red dragon—Satan, the two beasts, three reapings, the outpouring of the seven bowls, Babylon the Great and her destruction, the marriage of the Lamb, the war at Armageddon, the imprisonment of Satan, the millennial kingdom, the last rebellion, the judgment of the great white throne, the new heaven and new earth, the New Jerusalem, the river of water of life and the tree of life, and the blessings of God’s redeemed in eternity.²

Near the beginning of the great tribulation at the consummation of this age, Christ begins His parousia from heaven (Matt. 24:3, 21, 37-44). Then with the great earthquake of the sixth seal (Rev. 6:12-17), the great tribulation is initiated with supernatural calamities as the great day of the wrath of God and the Lamb. Following this, the supernatural calamities intensify with the first four trumpets as judgments on the earth, causing rebellious man to lose his safe habitation (8:6-12). Then the fifth, sixth, and seventh trumpets, as the three “woes,” bring judgment directly on the men of Antichrist’s kingdom (8:13—9:21; 11:14-18). As part of the events of the seventh trumpet, Christ continues His parousia by coming from heaven to the air (“clothed with a cloud,” 10:1-7) to take possession of the earth, the church age—the age of mystery—is completed, and the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ (11:15). Near the end of the great tribulation, Christ judges all the resurrected and raptured believers at His judgment seat in the air (2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Cor. 4:5; Matt. 25:19), and He calls the overcoming saints to His marriage dinner (Rev. 19:7-9). Then with all these faithful and overcoming ones, Christ descends openly to make war on Antichrist and his armies at Armageddon, and the beast and the false prophet are cast alive into the lake of fire (vv. 11-21). Following this, both in textual and chronological sequence, verses 1 through 6 of chapter 20 say,

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years and cast him into the abyss and shut it and sealed it over him, that

he might not deceive the nations any longer until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be loosed for a little while. And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and of those who had not worshipped the beast nor his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no authority, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.

After the defeat of Antichrist, Satan is bound and imprisoned so that the rebellious earth may be cleared up and the kingdom of Christ may come. This kingdom will last for one thousand years, during which the martyrs, the overcomers of the church age, and the later martyrs who overcame Antichrist will reign with Christ over the remaining nations of the restored earth. After this millennial reign, Satan is loosed to instigate the final rebellion of mankind, he is defeated and cast into the lake of fire, and the unbelieving dead are resurrected to stand before the judgment of the great white throne (vv. 7-15). It is during the millennial age that many negative items will be dealt with and the final rebellion of man will be cleared up in order to complete the work of God throughout all the ages. Finally, in the consummation of His work, the eternal age will be ushered in with the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth (v. 11—21:27). This is the scriptural record of the thousand-year age of the kingdom and the events surrounding it.

The Testimony of the Early Church Fathers

The belief and expectation in the Lord’s appearance to bring in His kingdom of one thousand years was kept and taught by the church in the post-apostolic times. The eminent church historian Philip Schaff writes,

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. It was indeed not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion, but a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers. (2:614)

Of these “distinguished teachers,” several are commonly cited. One of the earliest witnesses was Barnabas. The Epistle of Barnabas,³ written about A.D. 100, speaks concerning the Sabbath:

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 rested on the seventh day." This meaneth: when His Son, coming [again], shall destroy the time of the wicked man, and judge the ungodly, and change the sun, and the moon, and the stars, then shall He truly rest on the seventh day. (146)

This application of Psalm 90:4, 2 Peter 3:8, and Hebrews 4:9 clearly indicates the expectation that a Sabbath rest of one thousand years would follow the visible second coming of Christ. Another early teacher was Papias of Hierapolis, who had personal contact with the disciples of the Lord, especially John. He is called "a hearer of John, and a friend of Polycarp," who recounted what "the Lord taught in regard to those times," that is, the times of the coming kingdom (153-154). The fragments of Papias that we possess today speak mainly of the outward manifestations of the restored earth during the millennium.

Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian are weightier witnesses to the post-apostolic belief in the thousand-year kingdom. Justin, the greatest of the second-century apologists and the most prolific Christian writer up to his time, speaks repeatedly of the second parousia of Christ. In his "Dialogue with Trypho," he says,

I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged, [as] the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare. (239)

Justin does not depend on the extra-biblical notions of the millennium available at this time, but instead builds upon a scriptural foundation. He quotes Isaiah 65:17-25, which speaks of the restoration of the earth centered in Jerusalem, preceding it with, "Isaiah spake thus concerning this space of a thousand years" (239). Clearly, he interprets the prophecy of Isaiah in the light of the thousand years of Revelation 20:1-6, adding,

There was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied, by a revelation that was made to him, that those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem; and that thereafter the general, and, in short, the eternal resurrection and judgment of all men would likewise take place. (240)

Irenaeus of Lyons, the first significant theologian of the early church fathers, was also taught by Polycarp, the disciple of the apostle John. His labors up to the close of the second century are characterized by the evangelization of southern Gaul and his extensive polemic against heresies in

the decline of the church, his "Against Heresies" being called "one of the most precious remains of early Christian antiquity" (Coxe 311). Book 5 of this work, chapters 32 through 36, is a long presentation on the coming of Antichrist, the resurrection, judgment, and the thousand-year kingdom on the earth.⁴ In it he quotes extensively from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, the Gospels, and most notably Revelation. Being taught in the tradition of John, Irenaeus gives full credence to the writings of that apostle, citing "the most approved and ancient copies [of the Apocalypse], and those men who saw John face to face" (Irenaeus 558). In Book 5 he maintains the thousand-year-day interpretation of the days of creation and the Sabbath. He says concerning the six thousand years of human history, "For in as many days as this world was made, in so many thousand years shall it be concluded" (557). After dealing at length with the prophecies concerning the Antichrist, he says,

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

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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." (560)

This "seventh day" kingdom will be characterized by the restoration of creation to its "primeval condition" (561) and will be given to the seed of Abraham, including the church, the children of Abraham by faith, as the fulfillment of God's promise in Genesis 13:14-17 and elsewhere. It will be the time of reward for the faithful, which will 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" (562).

Irenaeus also interprets the "first resurrection" (Rev. 20:5-6) as a physical, bodily one. This is crucial, because the belief in a literal millennium is predicated upon a bodily resurrection of the saints prior to the thousand years. As

we shall see when we come to Augustine, the allegorical interpretation of the first resurrection, as referring to the spiritual birth of the believers, is a major tenet of the denial of a literal millennium. Irenaeus understood that, for the saints who die before the coming of the kingdom, the entrance into the kingdom will be the first resurrection, the “resurrection of the righteous,” the “resurrection of life” (Luke 14:14; John 5:29). He repeatedly refers to this resurrection: “John, therefore, did distinctly foresee the first ‘resurrection of the just,’ and the inheritance in the kingdom of the earth; and what the prophets have prophesied concerning it harmonize [with his vision]” (567). Irenaeus’s view of this resurrection is the physical resurrection of the bodies of the deceased saints before the millennium, “the resurrection of His disciples in the flesh,” on the earth and not in some “super-celestial place” (562), which he demonstrates at length. The second bodily resurrection is that of the unbelieving dead after the millennium (Rev. 20:12), when they will stand before God’s white throne of judgment, as Irenaeus notes,

After the times of the kingdom, he says, “I saw a great white throne, and Him who sat upon it, from whose face the earth fled away, and the heavens; and there was no more place for them.” And he sets forth, too, the things connected with the general resurrection and the judgment.” (566, emphasis added)

Irenaeus strongly contends that the prophecies concerning the resurrection of the dead and the future restoration of Jerusalem cannot be allegorized to represent spiritual blessings:

If, however, any shall endeavor to allegorize [prophecies] of this kind, they shall not be found consistent with themselves in all points, and shall be confuted by the teaching of the very expressions [in question]...Nothing is capable of being allegorized, but all things are steadfast, and true, and substantial, having been made by God for righteous men’s enjoyment. (565-566)

Tertullian of Carthage, the father of Latin Christianity, is called “an enthusiastic Chiliast” (Schaff 2:618). His general works at the turn of the third century formed the foundation for Cyprian and Augustine, and centuries later they contributed indirectly to the European Reformation and more directly to that in England. Concerning the millennium, he says, “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” (“Against Marcion” 342). Like Irenaeus, Tertullian maintained the distinction between the first resurrection before the thousand years and the general resurrection of the rest of the dead after that time. He refers to this sequence as the “stages of the last times” (563):

In the Revelation of John, again, the order of these times is spread out to view...that, after the casting of the devil into the bottomless pit for a while, the blessed prerogative of the first resurrection may be ordained from the thrones; and then again, after the consignment of him to the fire, that the judgment of the final and universal resurrection may be determined out of the books. (“Resurrection” 563, emphasis added)

Moreover, like Irenaeus, he saw both resurrections as being bodily. He allows that in some contexts *resurrection* can be interpreted spiritually, as referring to the beginning of the life of faith, but he argues that a spiritual resurrection today indicates that a physical one will take place in the future, before the thousand-year kingdom:

It moreover follows, that the very maintenance of this spiritual resurrection amounts to a presumption in favour of the other bodily resurrection; for if none were announced for that time [i.e., for the future], there would be fair ground for asserting only this purely spiritual resurrection. Inasmuch, however, as (a resurrection) is proclaimed for the last time, it is proved to be a bodily one, because there is no spiritual one also then announced. (563)

His meaning here is, if the resurrection that takes place at the present time is spiritual, the resurrection announced for the last time must be a different one, that is, a bodily one. Since both of the resurrections proclaimed in Revelation 20—the first and the general resurrections—occur in the future, they are physical. This conclusion is very important, as we shall see when we deal with Augustine. Other witnesses to the widely held millennial view in the ante-Nicene centuries include Hippolytus, Commodian, Lactantius, Victorinus, Methodius, and Apollinaris. These writers also drew upon the millennial Sabbath, symbolic usages of the number seven, and Old Testament typology and prophecy to speak of a thousand-year kingdom set up on the earth after Christ’s second coming (Schaff 2:618, Clouse 75-77). D. H. Kromminga gives an objective and balanced assessment of the early, subapostolic extent of the belief in the coming millennial kingdom. It was by no means ever held universally by the church, but it was maintained by credible and distinguished teachers and was received throughout the Christian world to the extent that it remained a notable teaching even up to the time of Jerome and Augustine (Kromminga 50).

An Opposing View in the Negative Progress of the Church

However, even these early teachings of the millennial kingdom were not without taint. The prophecy of Papias, which he claimed to derive from the Lord Himself

through His first generation of disciples, speaks of supernaturally great harvests of vines, wheat, and other produce during the millennium. Because of the extravagance of his utterance, Papias is often cited as exemplary of the “Jewish” and apocryphal notions of the coming kingdom. However, even if his predictions seem hyperbolic, their supernatural extent does not surpass that of the wolf dwelling with the lamb, the cow and the bear grazing together, and the nursing child playing by the cobra’s hole, as Isaiah (11:6-8) and other received prophets proclaimed. Kromminga observes, “Such representations of the future blessed condition of the subrational creation are not foreign to God’s special revelation” (55-56, cf. Ps. 72:16). Irenaeus also, drawing in part on Papias, was overly materialistic in his conceptions of the coming kingdom, especially in his interpretation of scriptural passages that speak of drinking and feasting, such as Matthew 26:29 and Luke 12:36-37 (Irenaeus 562, 564). Eventually, this improper, or at least unbalanced, portrayal of the millennial reign of Christ on the earth contributed to the discrediting of the teaching and caused it much damage.

Opposition to the apostolic and post-apostolic teaching of the millennium began in the early third century as a reaction to the misapplication and misinterpretation of the nature of the thousand-year kingdom on the earth. This misuse came from two directions. First, Jews who had not received the Christ as the Messiah still hoped for the restoration of Israel as prophesied in the Old Testament, and this Christless kingdom on the earth was understandably despised by Christians as the interpretation of Revelation “in a more Jewish manner,” as Eusebius states it (308), which came to be derisively called “Jewish chiliasm.” Second, the teachings of Papias and others overly emphasized the material enjoyments of the kingdom. This misplaced emphasis was exacerbated by certain deviant movements and some outright heresies that also embraced the promise of the coming kingdom but perverted it with sensual interpretations. One such heretic was Cerinthus, who denied the miraculous birth of Jesus and His divine nature. In Eusebius’s *Church History*, Caius of Rome accuses Cerinthus of saying that “after the resurrection the kingdom of Christ will be set up on earth, and that the flesh dwelling in Jerusalem will again be subject to desires and pleasures” (160). Dionysius of Alexandria, a pupil of Origen, was another strong third-century voice against a material millennium. Dionysius charges Cerinthus with teaching a millennium of delights of the belly, passion, festivals, and even the “slaying of victims” (160-161). Dionysius also opposed Nepos of Egypt, whom he otherwise commends for his faith and diligence, accusing him of engendering a hope for “small and mortal things in the kingdom of God” (308). Dionysius was effective in his day to turn the believers in Egypt away from their previously held expectation of the millennial kingdom.

However, this generation of teachers also demonstrated their own flaws. Although Dionysius held the book of Revelation in esteem, he did not believe the apostle John to be its author, and Eusebius concurs with his extensive reasoning to that effect (309-311). In the scholarly notes in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Arthur McGiffert concludes,

The chief Biblical support for this doctrine [of chiliasm] is found in Rev. xx. 1-6, and the fact that this book was appealed to so constantly by chiliasts in support of their views was the reason why Dionysius, Eusebius, and others were anxious to disprove its apostolic authorship. (172)

John F. Walvoord notes likewise,

The arguments for rejecting the apostolic authorship stem largely from the theological climate of the third century. At that time the Alexandrian School of Theology, including Dionysius, opposed the doctrine of the millennial kingdom which is plainly taught in chapter 20 with its reference to the thousand years. An attack by them on the authorship of John tended to weaken the force of this

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prophecy...It is most significant that the Johannine authorship was not questioned until the strong antichiliasmatic influence arose...at the end of the second century. (12)

Some went as far as ascribing Revelation to Cerinthus himself in order to further discredit it. As a result of the growing opposition to millennialism, *chiliasm* began to be tainted simply on the strength of its misconceived association with Judaism and materialism.⁵ McGiffert notes that this trend, “marks another step in the progress of the Church from the peculiarly enthusiastic spirit of the first and second, to the more formal spirit of the third and following centuries” (308). As we shall see, this “progress” is most accurately judged to be a negative progress, a decline that would lead to worsening error.

Origen and the “Impossible” Millennium

The three men most responsible for the subsidence of millenarian belief are Origen and Augustine directly, and Constantine the Great indirectly. Writing in the middle of the third century, Origen says,

Certain persons, then, refusing the labour of thinking, and adopting a superficial view of the letter of the law, and yielding rather in some measure to the indulgence of their own desires and lusts, being disciples of the letter alone, are of opinion that the fulfillment of the promises of the future are to be looked for in bodily pleasure and luxury...Consequently they say, that after the resurrection there will be marriages, and the begetting of children...These views they think to establish on the authority of the prophets by those promises which are written regarding Jerusalem...Such are the views of those who, while believing in Christ, understand the divine Scriptures in a sort of Jewish sense. (297)

Origen's aversion to a thousand-year kingdom on the earth was firstly due to his view that the physical body, and the material world in general, had no eternal place in God's design, a notion which may have been tainted by Gnosticism. In considering the physical aspect of the millennium, he too hastily grouped two different sources of its teaching. First, it is evident that certain darkened men had taken the scriptural truth of the coming kingdom and wrested it according to their carnal notions, of whom was Cerinthus. To be sure, the carnally indulgent future taught by this category of persons was not that spoken of by the true prophets of the Scriptures. However, it is also the case that genuine and proper Christian teachers spoke of the coming millennium in a purer manner, and it is these also whom Origen accuses of understanding the Scriptures too physically, "in a sort of Jewish sense." Nevertheless, like Dionysius and Eusebius, Origen did not sort the wheat from the chaff but rejected altogether the idea of a physical kingdom on the earth. As we shall see later, however, Origen's eschatology was altogether unscriptural and untrustworthy.

Origen's position was also a natural outcome of his allegorical method of reading the Scriptures, which he explains in detail in Book 4 of *De Principiis*. He begins by tracing the cause of the Jews' rejection of Christ to their literal, material understanding of the prophecies concerning His coming. Not having come in power with a physical kingdom, Christ did not seem to them to be their Messiah. Origen concludes, "The reason of the erroneous apprehension...is no other than this, that holy Scripture is not understood by them according to its spiritual, but according to its literal meaning" (357). According to Origen, Scripture is to be understood in a threefold manner, analogous to the three parts of man (1 Thes. 5:23). The "body" of Scripture is its common and historical sense, which may be grasped even by simple persons. Those who have made more progress can be edified by the "soul" of Scripture, which is its metaphorical or allegorical meaning. Finally, those who have been perfected apprehend the "spirit" of the Scriptures, the heavenly things, of which the material serve as a pattern

or shadow. Thus, the literal meaning of the Scriptures, to Origen, belonged to the material, spatial, and temporal realm, which the Alexandrian school tended to reject. Origen claimed that in order to assist the reader to advance from the "body" to the "soul" and "spirit," the Holy Spirit purposely inserted causes of stumbling for the purely literal reader:

Divine wisdom took care that certain stumbling-blocks, or interruptions, to the historical meaning should take place, by the introduction into the midst (of the narrative) of certain impossibilities and incongruities; that in this way the very interruption of the narrative might, as by the interposition of a bolt, present an obstacle to the reader, whereby he might refuse to acknowledge the way which conducts to the ordinary meaning. (364)

Origen's point is that when we encounter "impossibilities and incongruities" in the Word of God, we should turn from the ordinary, literal meaning of the passage to its spiritual meaning. When appropriate, the Spirit inspired a narrative that should be understood both literally and spiritually, "a texture of both kinds in one style of narration" (364). In addition, however,

he inserted sometimes certain things which either did not take place or could not take place; sometimes also what might happen, but what did not: and He does this at one time in a few words, which, taken in their "bodily" meaning, seem incapable of containing truth, and at another by the insertion of many [words]. (364)

This rule, he asserts, applies not only to the allusive utterances of Old Testament prophecies but also to the plain accounts of the New Testament. Speaking of the writings of the "evangelists and apostles," he says,

Whence also in them were intermingled not a few things by which, the historical order of the narrative being interrupted and broken up, the attention of the reader might be recalled, by the impossibility of the case, to an examination of the inner meaning. (364-365)

To Origen, the New Testament contains many things which "either did not take place or could not take place" or "what might happen, but what did not." He does not leave his reader without examples of his method. In the category of "impossibilities and incongruities," he includes the account of the first three days of creation (Gen. 1:3-13), God's planting of a garden in Eden (2:8-9), His walking in the garden in the cool of the day (3:8), and the departure of Cain from the presence of Jehovah (4:10-16). More alarmingly, he continues with the New Testament, citing Matthew 4:8-9:

The same style of Scriptural narrative occurs abundantly

in the Gospels, as when the devil is said to have placed Jesus on a lofty mountain, that he might show Him from thence all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them. How could it literally come to pass, either that Jesus should be led up by the devil into a high mountain, or that the latter should show him all the kingdoms of the world (as if they were lying beneath his bodily eyes, and adjacent to one mountain), i.e., the kingdoms of the Persians, and Scythians, and Indians?...And many other instances similar to this will be found in the Gospels...which cannot be admitted historically. (365)

Thus, many “impossibilities and incongruities,” which “cannot be admitted historically,” are to be found in the Gospels, directing the reader to a metaphorical or “spiritual” interpretation. To Bible-believing Christians, Origen’s formula is troubling. No one who comes in faith to the Gospels should be ready to ask, “How could it literally come to pass?” claiming that such inadmissible passages occur “abundantly.” A paradigm for reading God’s Word that identifies “things which either did not take place or could not take place” opens the door to an evil heart of unbelief (Heb. 3:12). Origen’s interpretive method is excessive and easily misapplied.

We have examined Origen’s teaching, not simply to debate interpretive methods but to establish the context of his attitude toward the Old Testament prophecies of the thousand-year kingdom of Christ on the earth. As we have seen, he blamed the Jews’ rejection of Christ on their literal interpretation of the prophecies. To exemplify this, he cites Isaiah 11:6-7:

The Jews, in fine, owing to the hardness of their heart, and from a desire to appear wise in their own eyes, have not believed in our Lord and Saviour, judging that those statements which were uttered respecting Him ought to be understood literally...They think, also, that it has been predicted that the wolf—that four-footed animal—is, at the coming of Christ, to feed with the lambs, and the leopard to lie down with kids, and the calf and the bull to pasture with lions, and that they are to be led by a little child to the pasture; that the ox and the bear are to lie down together in the green fields, and that their young ones are to be fed together; that lions will frequent stalls with the oxen, and feed on straw. (356)

The dispensationally correct solution for the unbelief of the Jews is that they should have recognized Isaiah 11 as pertaining to the Messiah’s second coming, not His first. Origen’s solution, however, is simply that they should have interpreted this passage spiritually, casting off any literal application of it. This suggests that Origen did not believe that the wolf will feed with the lambs in the restored earth yet to come. To him, the restoration of God’s creation at Christ’s second coming was yet another

impossibility and incongruity, inserted into the Word of God in order to stumble the reader from its plain sense. It is something that “could not take place,” a matter that in its literal sense is “incapable of containing truth” (364). This again is an example of his excessive misappropriation of the allegorical method.

According to God’s economy, Christ came the first time in humility, and He will come a second time in power. At the commencement of the age of grace and of mystery, Christ came, according to prophecy, “meek and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, a foal of a beast of burden” (Matt. 21:5; Zech. 9:9). His kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36) but in the divine and mystical realm of the hidden, inner reality of the kingdom of the heavens. His second coming, however, will be in power, in the glory of His Father with His angels. At that time, He will come not secretly in a manger but with a shout of command, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God (1 Thes. 4:16; Matt. 24:31), and the kingdom of the world will visibly become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ (Rev. 11:15), a kingdom that will be manifested on the earth. This will be the time for Christ to reward

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His faithful and overcoming slaves, repay each man according to his doings, and destroy those who destroy the earth (v. 18; Matt. 16:27). In consequence of the kingdom of the world becoming the kingdom of Christ, He will restore the earth to its pristine condition (Matt. 19:28), which is “the restoration of all things, of which God spoke through the mouth of His holy prophets from of old” (Acts 3:21). At that time, the time of the restoration,

The wolf will dwell with the lamb; / And the leopard will lie down with the kid, / And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; / And a young boy will lead them about. / The cow and the bear will graze; / Their young will lie down together; / And the lion will eat straw like the ox. / The nursing child will play by the cobra’s hole, / And upon the viper’s den / The weaned child will stretch his hand. / They will not harm nor destroy / In all My holy mountain, / For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of Jehovah, / As water covers the sea. (Isa. 11:6-9)

In reproving the Jews for their hardheartedness in looking for signs of power in the first coming of Christ, Origen

spoke well. However, he erred in finding the solution to their unbelief in a virtually unlimited allegorizing of Scripture. Origen's allegorical method is excessive in claiming an abundance of "impossibilities and incongruities" in both the Old and New Testaments. In an unchecked willingness to identify whole passages of the Bible as being incomprehensible from a literal standpoint, he sowed a seed that can be reaped only as corruption to the Word of God. Moreover, concerning the hope of the millennial reign of Christ on the restored earth in particular, Origen's interpretive method does not produce "spiritual" beliefs but common unbelief.

Constantine, the "Great Tree," and the Decline of Millennialism

The crushing blow, as Schaff calls it (2:619), for the belief in the millennial kingdom was not a shift in theology or in the method of interpreting the Scriptures. It was the complete and sudden change of the social and political circumstances of the church, beginning with the conversion of Constantine to Christianity and his accession to the throne of the Roman Empire near the beginning of the fourth century. This period marks the transition of Christianity from under persecution by the secular government to union with it at the beginning of the state-church system:

The despised sect, which, like its Founder in the days of His humiliation, had not where to lay its head, is raised to sovereign authority in the state, enters into the prerogatives of the pagan priesthood, grows rich and powerful, builds countless churches out of the stones of idol temples to the honor of Christ and his martyrs, employs the wisdom of Greece and Rome to vindicate the foolishness of the cross, exerts a molding power upon civil legislation, rules the national life, and leads off the history of the world. But at the same time the church, embracing the mass of the population of the empire, from the Caesar to the meanest slave, and living amidst all its institutions, received into her bosom vast deposits of foreign material from the world and from heathenism, exposing herself to new dangers and imposing upon herself new and heavy labors. (3:5)

As a natural result of this new order of the world, the inner instinct of the believers to eagerly wait for "the city which has the foundations, whose Architect and Builder is God" (Heb. 11:10), waned, and the city of God began to find its more comfortable place amidst the city of Satan (Rev. 2:12-13). The historical perspective of Christians changed particularly with respect to the Roman Empire. Robert Clouse, et al., notes,

Fewer Christians were inclined to regard Rome as a force of evil and the emperor as the Antichrist...The millennial

hope had thrived while people were under the pressure of persecution, but now in the newly "Christianized" Roman world, official hostility was past and there was a lessened need for such endtime teaching. The time was ripe for a new eschatology to replace chiliasm. (79-80)

Schaff says likewise,

The Christian life of the Nicene and post-Nicene age reveals a mass of worldliness within the church; an entire abatement of chiliasm with its longing after the return of Christ and his glorious reign, and in its stead an easy repose in the present order of things. (3:5)

This great development was foretold in the parable of the mustard seed in Matthew 13:31-32. The Lord said,

The kingdom of the heavens is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, and which is smaller than all the seeds; but when it has grown, it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of heaven come and roost in its branches.

This speaks of the abnormal development of the outward appearance of the kingdom of the heavens. The church, which is the embodiment of the kingdom in its inner reality today, should be like an herb that produces food. However, beginning from the time of Constantine, its nature and function were changed, so that it became a "tree," a lodging place for "birds," which in Matthew 13 signify Satan's evil spirits with the evil persons and things motivated by them (vv. 4, 19). In mixing the church with the world, Constantine

brought thousands of false believers into Christianity, making it Christendom, no longer the church....The mustard is an annual herb, whereas the tree is a perennial plant. The church, according to its heavenly and spiritual nature, should be like the mustard herb, sojourning on the earth. But with its nature changed, the church became deeply rooted and settled in the earth as a tree, flourishing with its enterprises as the branches to lodge many evil persons and things. (Lee, *Conclusion* 2576)

As a direct consequence of the church's loss of its sojourning nature, the belief in the kingdom of Christ yet to come upon the earth fell into disfavor. As a result, in the further decline of the church, millennialism came to be rejected and disparaged.

Tyconius, Augustine, and the Allegorical Millennium

The strongest formulations that put an end to the belief in a thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth were those of Augustine, whose allegorical interpretation of the millennium became the undisputed rule of faith for many

centuries to come. To this end, he was influenced by two works of Tyconius in the latter part of the fourth century. First, Tyconius's *Book of Rules* was an early codification of the allegorical method of the interpretation of Scripture, and together with Ambrose he is credited with adapting this method from the Eastern church to the Latin church (Toon 13). Augustine brought forward large portions of *Rules* into his own "On Christian Doctrine." After discussing the various kinds of figures of speech employed by the authors of Scripture (allegory, enigma, parable, metaphor, etc.), all under the general name of "trope" (*tropus*), he reviews Tyconius's seven rules of interpretation. Of particular interest are rules 5 and 6. The fifth rule of Tyconius is the rule of times, which is applicable to all numbers. It states that a length of time, or any number, may be either a synecdoche or a "legitimate" number, but in both cases, the number stands for a value other than its face value, as in the case of seven, ten, or twelve, which are taken to mean not units but a fullness of quantity. Augustine does not discuss when or even whether a number is to be taken literally; his interest is in how to find its spiritual connotation. The sixth rule of Tyconius is that of recapitulation, in which two events that follow each other in a narrative actually refer to the same event, such as the account of the creation of man in Genesis 2:7-25, which follows the seventh day in the narrative but actually provides further details about the sixth day. He summarizes Tyconius as follows: "Now all these rules...make one meaning to be understood where another is expressed, which is the peculiarity of figurative diction," adding that figures occur so often in the Scriptures that the art of rhetoric does not have a name for every kind ("Doctrine" 573). The rules of Tyconius are of special import when we come to the book of Revelation, in which numbers, times, and sequences play significant roles.

It is necessary to understand the principle of Augustine's guidelines. To Augustine, the difference between interpreting a passage literally or symbolically is the very difference between the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament the things of God were communicated in signs, but in the New Testament the spiritual realities behind the signs have been revealed. Therefore, to take a figurative expression in the Bible literally is to take it according to the dead letter, which kills (2 Cor. 3:6): "We must beware of taking a figurative expression literally...For when what is said figuratively is taken as if it were said literally, it is understood in a carnal manner." This was the error of the Jews who, being in subjection to the flesh by a blind adherence to the letter, rejected Christ as the reality and revelation of the things signified by the letter. Even up to the present time, however, it is also the "miserable slavery of the soul" of anyone who uses a sign without knowing what it signifies (559). It is better, he says, to not even know what a sign signifies, as long as one

recognizes that it is a sign and not a literal denotation. In summary, Augustine's principle of the New Testament and of our freedom from bondage in Christ is to lift the veil of the literal meaning of the Bible and reveal the allegory within it.

Augustine treats the converse error, that of mistaking a literal passage as figurative, with much less stigma. His rule is, "Whatever there is in the word of God that cannot, when taken literally, be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you may set down as figurative." That is, we may take a passage as figurative only after determining that it is not a literal injunction to "the love of God and one's neighbor" or "the knowledge of God and one's neighbor" (560-561). Thus, the two guiding beacons that guide us away from over-spiritualizing the Bible are love and dealing with the flesh: "Scripture enjoins nothing except charity, and condemns nothing except lust, and in that way fashions the lives of men" (561). Augustine continues by giving many examples and refinements of this rule, but his governing principle is simply that any passage that directly and unambiguously enjoins us to a holy manner of life should be taken liter-

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ally. In this way he concludes that Scripture may be taken safely to be "a narrative of the past, a prophecy of the future, and a description of the present"—and by this we are to understand a *literal* narrative, *literal* prophecy, and *literal* description—only when it tends to "nourish and strengthen charity, and to overcome and root out lust" (561). Otherwise, we read more maturely if we apply the first and foremost principle, which is to strip off the veil of the flesh and find the spirit of allegory in the passage. This is Augustine's strong heritage from Tyconius, and as we shall now see, it forms the basis for his understanding of the millennium.

The Birth of Amillennialism

The second work of Tyconius that influenced Augustine was his *Commentary on Revelation*, in which he applied his allegorical method to interpret the first resurrection as the conversion of the saints and the millennium as the condition of the church in the present age. Augustine made use of Tyconius's interpretation in his *The City of God*. Because the effect of Augustine's work on Christianity was profound, we will summarize his exposition of Revelation

20:1-8 point by point, saving our comments for later. To Augustine these verses are almost entirely figurative, consisting of a series of figures, or *tropi*, as follows. *Tropus* 1—the first resurrection: Revelation 20:4-6 says, “They lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years...This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection.” Concerning the resurrection of the martyrs at the beginning of the millennium, he says, “This resurrection regards not the body, but the soul. For souls, too, have a death of their own in wickedness and sins” (*City* 717). It is the believers’ passing from death into life at the time of their believing in Christ (John 5:24-25). This is an application of the sixth interpretive rule of Tyconius, because it treats Revelation 20 not as following Christ’s coming in chapter 19 but as recapitulating the entire church age prior to Christ’s coming. The spiritual, allegorical interpretation of the first resurrection is the foremost requirement for the denial of a literal millennium. Revelation 20:12 speaks of a second resurrection, the one in which the unrighteous partake before the judgment at the great white throne: “And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne.” Augustine expounds,

So are there also two resurrections—the one the first and spiritual resurrection, which has place in this life, and preserves us from coming into the second death; the other the second, which does not occur now, but in the end of the world, and which is of the body, not of the soul. (718)

Tropus 2—the binding of Satan (Rev. 20:1-2): To Augustine, this is the binding of Satan by the church in this age in order to bring sinners out of the kingdom of darkness (Matt. 12:29; 18:18; Acts 26:18). This binding is effective for the salvation of sinners, although it is limited and specialized with respect to Satan’s activities as a whole. *Tropus* 3—the thousand years: Augustine allows for two interpretations. First, he adapts Tyconius’s fifth rule of times and numbers:

These things happen in the sixth thousand of years or sixth millennium (the latter part of which is now passing), as if during the sixth day, which is to be followed by a Sabbath which has no evening, the endless rest of the saints, so that, speaking of a part under the name of the whole, he calls the last part of the millennium—the part, that is, which had yet to expire before the end of the world—a thousand years. (720)

He has already placed the first resurrection within the sixth day of creation, which is the present age, in accordance with the first trope, above. This requires that the seventh millennium begin before the sixth is completed. The seventh millennium, then, is actually the latter part of the sixth, the two proceeding to completion contemporaneously. This obscure interpretation also breaks the

normal pattern of the thousand-year-day figure by equating the Sabbath day with the endless age. Augustine’s second interpretation is the more enduring, classic one, which altogether avoids any “legitimate” usage of the number one thousand:

[John] used the thousand years as an equivalent for the whole duration of this world, employing the number of perfection to mark the fulness of time. For a thousand is the cube of ten...If a hundred is sometimes used for totality,...with how much greater reason is a thousand put for totality since it is the cube, while the other is only the square? (720)

The next four *tropi* relate to Revelation 20:3, 7, and 8, which speak of the sealing of Satan in the abyss, his inability to deceive the nations until the thousand years are completed, and his being loosed at the end of the thousand years. *Tropus* 4—the abyss: Augustine comments, “By the *abyss* is meant the countless multitude of the wicked whose hearts are unfathomably deep in malignity against the Church of God” (720). The devil already has been abiding in the hearts of the wicked, but now he is set there with a seal, which signifies that it is a secret who belongs to the devil’s party and who does not. *Tropus* 5—the undeceived nations: These are the church. Although Satan certainly deceives the “abyss,” the unbelieving nations, he is restrained from seducing those nations (the believers) predestined to eternal life. *Tropus* 6—“until”: Verse 3 says, “That he might not deceive the nations any longer until the thousand years were completed (ἄχρι τελεσθῆ τὰ χίλια ἔτη).” *Until* is not to be understood as indicating that after the thousand years the devil will seduce the nations. This is untenable, he says, since the nations are the believers (by *Tropus* 5). By reordering the text of verse 3, he renders “until...were completed” with the meaning of “while...being completed.” In other words, Satan will not deceive the nations (the church), not even after the thousand years. *Tropus* 7—the loosing of Satan: Augustine predicts that for three and a half years (which apparently are literal years), Satan will intensify the persecution of the church and prevent any further people from being saved.

The last three *tropi* we will mention relate to the martyrs and their reign with Christ. *Tropus* 8—the martyrs: Augustine again applies a synecdoche to identify those who had been beheaded (v. 4) with the whole of the believers, whether living or now dead, who suffer in this age for the testimony of Jesus. The only elaboration he needs in this regard is to assert that saints are able to reign even while they are dead: “The souls of the pious dead are not separated from the Church,” and “their souls reign with Him, though not as yet in conjunction with their bodies” (726-727). *Tropus* 9—the thrones: Augustine proposes that the “thrones” refer to the offices of

leadership in the church, to “the seats of the rulers and to the rulers themselves by whom the Church is now governed” (726). This also ensures that reigning with Christ is a matter of the present age. *Tropus* 10—reigning with Christ for a thousand years: Augustine says,

While the devil is bound, the saints reign with Christ during the same thousand years, understood in the same way, that is, of the time of [i.e., following] His first coming. For...the Church could not now be called His kingdom or the kingdom of heaven unless His saints were even now reigning with Him, though in another and far different way. (725)

He supports this interpretation simply by demonstrating from a number of passages in the New Testament that the kingdom of the heavens, in one of its aspects, exists in the present age as the “kingdom militant” (726). The remainder of Augustine’s *tropi*—the beast, his image, Gog and Magog, the camp of the saints, the fire out of heaven, and the scrolls at the last judgment (vv. 4, 8-9, 12)—are not vital for the discussion at hand. Two main features emerge from Augustine’s interpretation of Revelation 20. First, the thousand-year reign of Christ with His saints transpires in the present age of the church, and second, there will be no literal thousand-year kingdom in the future. Thus, the codification of this school of thought by Augustine may be considered the birth of amillennialism as a definite eschatological system, and for many centuries to come these main tenets would be the received orthodoxy of the church.

A Critique of Augustine’s Application

The interpretive method of Augustine is by far nobler and more rational than Origen’s radical allegorization. Augustine’s reliance on Tyconius and his own elaborations attempts to establish an orderly hermeneutic, as set forth in “On Christian Doctrine.” He taught the necessary principle that the interpretation of any passage should be governed by the testimony of other passages in Scripture (“Doctrine” 567), and he commended costly labor and prayer for difficult and ambiguous passages. However, we still find the case for a critique of the application of his system, particularly with regard to Revelation 20. It is good to seek out the spiritual interpretation of many key passages and phrases in both the Old and New Testaments, although in doing so one should always strive to keep the governing principle of God’s eternal economy in the light of the entire Scriptures. Augustine, for example, properly indicates that the rising of the dead at the voice of the Lord in John 5:25 refers to the enlivening and regeneration of the deadened spirits of those who believe in Christ, whereas the coming forth unto life or unto judgment in verse 29 is the literal, bodily, future resurrection of the believers and unbelievers, respectively

(Eph. 2:1, 5; 1 Cor. 15:22-23; Rev. 20:12; *City* 716-717). A synecdochical interpretation of the martyrs for the testimony of Jesus in Revelation 20:4 (cf. 1:9) and a belief that it is our portion to reign in life by grace in the practical church life as the kingdom of God today is also without fault according to Scriptures (Rom. 5:17, 21; 14:17). However, in Revelation 20 Augustine applies his allegorical method excessively and unnecessarily, rendering his exegesis open to much criticism. He allegorizes some elements beyond reason, such as making the seventh millennium a small part of the sixth, while juxtaposing them, without justification, alongside literal elements, such as the three and a half years of final persecution. In places, his interpretation is unintelligible and unmotivated, as Kromminga concludes, giving it the appearance of an “uncertain attempt to solve a puzzle” (112).

We are left to conclude that the reasoning behind Augustine’s allegorization was his aversion to the material, even carnal, conception of the thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth, the misconception that had been common to its critics for over a century.⁶ The evolution of

The reasoning behind Augustine's allegorization was his aversion to the material, even carnal, conception of the thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth.

his thought is as follows. Concerning Revelation 20:4-5 he writes,

Those who, on the strength of this passage, have suspected that the first resurrection is future and bodily, have been moved, among other things, specially by the number of a thousand years, as if it were a fit thing that the saints should thus enjoy a kind of Sabbath-rest during that period...And this opinion would not be objectionable, if it were believed that the joys of the saints in that Sabbath shall be spiritual, and consequent on the presence of God. (*City* 719)

Then he adds, “I myself, too, once held this opinion” (719). Indeed, his earlier “Sermon 259” reveals a definite millenarian thought. In speaking of the significance of the eighth day, he divides history into eight ages. The first six are from Adam to Noah, Noah to Abraham, Abraham to David, David to the deportation to Babylon, from the deportation to Babylon until Christ (Matt. 1:17), and the present age. The last two ages, or “days,” are as follows:

This eighth, octave, day represents the new life at the end

of the age; the seventh day, the rest and quiet the saints will have *on this earth*. The Lord, you see, will reign *on earth* with his saints, as the scriptures say, and he will have his Church *here*. (“Sermon” 177, emphasis added)

The present (sixth) age, he says, is for the threshing of the wheat (the believers), which will be followed by the judgment, after which the perfected saints will be displayed on the earth as a satisfaction to the Lord:

After the winnowing of the day of judgment, the vast column of the saints will become apparent, resplendent in worth and dignity, made mighty by their merits, and displaying at their head the mercy of their liberator. And that will be the seventh day. (178)

He particularly asserts that the wheat must be displayed on the same threshing floor on which it was purged, meaning that the splendid display of the seventh day will be on the earth, not in the “heavenly granary,” which is the locale of the eighth day. Then, “after the seventh day, when the full worth of the harvest becomes apparent on the threshing floor, . . . we shall go into that life and into that rest,” which is the eighth and everlasting day (178). Augustine never indicates how long the seventh day of display and rest will be, but he gives it the status of an age, comparable to the other ages of history. That this age will follow the Lord’s judgment, precede the eternal age, and take place on the earth is clearly a millenarian view. Later, however, he came to subscribe to the popular misconceptions concerning the millennium:

The evangelist John has spoken of these two resurrections in the book which is called the Apocalypse, but in such a way that some Christians do not understand the first of the two, and so construe the passage into ridiculous fancies. . . . As they assert that those who then rise again shall enjoy the leisure of immoderate carnal banquets, furnished with an amount of meat and drink such as not only to shock the feeling of the temperate, but even to surpass the measure of credulity itself, such assertions can be believed only by the carnal.⁷ They who do believe them are called by the spiritual Chiliasts. (*City* 718-719)

This is a pivotal passage in Augustine’s exposition, providing the link between his spiritual sensibilities, his rules of interpretation, and his later amillennialism. As we have seen, his sieve for admitting a literal interpretation of a passage was its effect on a godly manner of life, encapsulated in the twofold criteria of love and the restraint of lust: If a passage of Scripture, when taken literally, tends toward engendering love for God and man and restricting the indulgence of the flesh, its literal interpretation is admissible. If, however, it tends to cool down love and heat up lust, its literal interpretation must be rejected, and an allegorical meaning must be sought. This rule goes

a long way toward rationalizing Augustine’s almost complete allegorization of Revelation 20. As we have seen above, he turned the age after Christ’s coming into the age before it—resurrection into regeneration, the seventh day into the sixth day, a millennium into part of a thousand years, the abyss into nations, nations into the church, “completed” into “being completed,” Satan bound into Satan merely limited, and Satan loosed into Satan partially in check. This was because he, like others before him, came to believe that the teaching of the earthly millennium was carnal. Without this reasoning—and without ascribing to Augustine the unjustified, irrational allegorization of Origen—there is no other necessity in his hermeneutic to compel this interpretation. As we will consider shortly, the millennial teaching of the reign of Christ on earth is not at all that of “immoderate carnal banquets” that “shock the feeling of the temperate.” Thus, Augustine’s allegorization is unnecessary and, in fact, deleterious.

The Eschatology of Origen and Augustine and the Foundations of Purgatory

The denial of a future age for the completion of the work of God’s economy, after the church age and before eternity, left a gap in the eschatology of the post-Nicene church fathers. As we have shown on other occasions, it was the common opinion of the early teachers, both in the West and in the East, that believers who die in an impure, unsanctified, or unfaithful condition would enter into the eternal fellowship and enjoyment of God only after passing through a further process of discipline and perfection after death. Augustine in particular spoke concerning forgiveness for sinful believers after their death (Matt. 12:32):

Temporary punishments are suffered by some in this life only, by others after death, by others both now and then; but all of them before that last and strictest judgment. But of those who suffer temporary punishments after death, all are not doomed to those everlasting pains which are to follow that judgment; for to some, as we have already said, what is not remitted in this world is remitted in the next, that is, they are not punished with the eternal punishment of the world to come. (*City* 784)

It is clear that Augustine taught that some believers will require a temporary punishment for their perfection after their death.⁸ The New Testament indeed teaches that there is a coming judgment for believers, called the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10), at which we will all render an account to the Lord for our life and work in the present age. As a result of this judgment, which will take place near the end of the great tribulation, the mature and faithful believers will be rewarded with entrance into the millennial kingdom, while those believers judged to be

sinful and unfaithful will be disciplined for their maturity and perfection in that same age. However, Augustine had already denied the existence of the thousand years. Therefore, being a systematic thinker and lacking a vehicle for the future discipline and completion of the believers, he conjectured an alternate eschatology. The time of discipline, he said, will be in “the interval of time between the death of this body and that last day of judgment and retribution which shall follow the resurrection” (803); the discipline itself he termed as the “pains proper to the spirits of the dead” (795). According to his system, the discipline of defeated believers begins immediately after their death and lasts for a time that is indeterminate but not extending past the coming of the Lord, the final judgment, and the commencement of the eternal age. Augustine also introduced the terminology for this process, speaking of purgatorial punishments (*poenae purgatoriae*), purgatorial torments (*t tormenta purgatoria*), and purgatorial fire (*ignis purgatorius*). In later medieval times, these and derivative terms were simplified and shortened to “purgatory” (*purgatorium*). It is for these reasons that Augustine has been called the “true father of purgatory,” the first and greatest teacher of antiquity to introduce the elements that later would be codified as heretical Roman Catholic doctrine (Le Goff 63, 61).

Origen was the first writer to clearly state that the soul can be purified after death. He taught that everyone tainted by sin will come, after death, to a baptism of fire which will affect him more or less severely according to his spiritual condition. In this way, those who die are cleansed after death by remedial and salutary punishments: “Certainly it is understood that the fury of God’s vengeance is profitable for the purgation of souls...The punishment, also, which is said to be applied by fire, is understood to be applied with the object of healing” (Origen 296). However, Origen felt that all persons, believers and unbelievers, will be afforded the opportunity of correction and perfection through salutary punishments. Even hell, to Origen, is a temporary abode, a kind of purgatory from which even the most wicked will eventually benefit. Because of his belief in the steady improvement of the soul after death and the redemptive value of post-mortem suffering, Origen too is rightly called a founding father of the teaching of purgatory (Le Goff 52-57).

The gap left in the eschatology of the post-Nicene church by the denial of a future kingdom age came to be filled, in the decline of the medieval church, by the heretical teaching of purgatory. According to the full revelation of the Scriptures, the millennial age will be the final age of accomplishment in God’s economy, an age within the old creation in which the final negative elements of the universe will be dealt with and the last of God’s enemies subdued. One of the functions of the kingdom age will be

to provide a time for the discipline and perfection of those believers who were defeated in their lifetime in the church age. Compelled by the need to find a vehicle for dealing with the unfit and unfaithful believers, and denying this *raison d’être* of the millennium, Augustine developed an alternate eschatology in which these believers are perfected not in a future age but in a parallel “world.” Thus, after putting the “nail in the coffin” of belief in the millennium in Western Christianity, as Origen did in the East, he laid the foundation of a speculative teaching of the believers’ future that later became the Roman Catholic teaching of purgatory. Despite his genius as the most formidable teacher of Christianity from the time of the apostle Paul to the century of Calvin, we must assert that Augustine’s eschatology, like that of Origen, is not trustworthy.

The Heavenly Section of the Millennial Kingdom

As noted at the beginning of this article, a proper understanding of the millennial kingdom requires certain scriptural keys to solve the problems and answer the questions posed by its study. The first key is the realiza-

The gap left in the eschatology of the post-Nicene church by the denial of a future kingdom age came to be filled, in the decline of the medieval church, by the heretical teaching of purgatory.

tion that the coming kingdom will be constituted with three categories of persons. In the age of the patriarchs, from Adam to Moses (Rom. 5:14), and the age of the law, from Moses to the first coming of Christ (John 1:17), God gained the nation of Israel as His Old Testament people to know Him by the law and worship Him in the types and shadows of the offerings in the tabernacle and the temple. Outside of these were the nations, the Gentiles, who had no portion in God. After Christ’s first coming, He formed the church, the New Testament people of God composed of saved Jews and Gentiles, to receive Christ as the fulfillment of all the Old Testament types and shadows, know Him by the inner law of life, and worship in spirit and reality to be built up as the Father’s house and the Body of Christ (Col. 2:17; Rom. 8:2; John 4:24; 1 Tim. 3:15; Eph. 1:22-23). Outside of these are unbelievers, both Jews and Gentiles. Thus, at the present time God recognizes three categories of people: “Jews...Greeks and...the church of God” (1 Cor. 10:32). All three categories will be represented in the coming kingdom, each with their respective blessings, portion, and role in the millennium as the final age of accomplishment for God’s economy.⁹

The second scriptural key for the proper understanding of the millennium is that it will be composed of two parts, or sections—a heavenly one and an earthly one. The three categories of persons and the two sections of the kingdom govern the various names and descriptions given to the kingdom both in the Old and New Testaments. First, the heavenly part of the millennium is called the kingdom of the Father. Matthew 13:43 says, “Then the righteous will shine forth like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” The kingdom of the heavens today is the reality of the kingdom, the inward content of the kingdom in its heavenly and spiritual nature, as revealed in Matthew 5 through 7. The manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens will be the practical coming of the kingdom in power, as revealed in Matthew 24 and 25, which will be a reward to the overcomers, who live in the kingdom’s reality today (24:46-47; 25:19-23; Luke 19:15-19; Rev. 2:26-27; 3:21; 2 Tim. 2:12). These are the “righteous,” who will shine forth in the kingdom of their Father.

The heavenly kingdom is also the kingdom of Christ and of God. Ephesians 5:5 says, “For this you realize, knowing that every fornicator or unclean person or greedy person (who is an idolater) has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.” The believers have been regenerated into the kingdom of God (John 3:5) and are, in the church life, living in the kingdom of God today (Rom. 14:17). However, not all believers will participate in the millennium; only the overcoming ones will. The unclean, defeated ones will have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God in the coming age. The heavenly part of the coming kingdom is also the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Second Peter 1:11 says, “For in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly and bountifully supplied to you.” The eternal kingdom here refers

to the kingdom of God, which was given to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Dan. 7:13-14) and which will be manifested at His coming back (Luke 19:11-12). It will be a reward to His faithful believers, who pursue the growth in His life unto maturity and the development of the virtues of His nature that in the millennium they may participate in His kingship in God’s glory. (Recovery Version, note 1)

The foregoing references emphasize the overcomers of the New Testament period. The heavenly section of the millennial kingdom will be composed also of the Old Testament overcomers. This is indicated by the Lord’s word in Matthew 8:11: “But I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and will recline at table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of the heavens.” It will be in the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens that the overcoming Gentile believers will

feast with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the other Old Testament overcomers. Hebrews 11:26 similarly tells us that Moses esteemed “the reproach of the Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he looked away to the reward.” Because he was willing to suffer the reproach of the Christ, Moses will receive the reward of the coming kingdom. Likewise, whether or not we—the New Testament believers—shall receive the reward of the heavenly section of the millennial kingdom depends on our enjoyment, experience, and expression of Christ. This heavenly section of the kingdom will be the realm for Christ and the overcomers to reign over the nations and for the overcomers to be priests of God and of Christ for one thousand years (Rev. 20:4, 6; 2:26-27).

The Earthly Section of the Millennial Kingdom

The coming millennial kingdom will be composed also of an earthy part, which is the kingdom of the Messiah. At the end of this age, in the great tribulation, Antichrist and his armies will make war against Israel and will slaughter two-thirds of the Jews. Of the one-third remaining in the land, most will probably be in the area of Jerusalem. Out of this one-third, half will be captured by Antichrist, but in His mercy God will preserve the remaining half (11:2; 13:7; Zech. 13:8—14:2; Dan. 12:1). Then Jehovah as Christ will come with His saints and go forth to fight against and defeat Antichrist and his followers, the nations (Joel 3:11; Rev. 17:14; 19:11-21). This will result in Israel’s household salvation, in which the remnant of Israel will see Christ descending in the air and will repent, call on Him, receive Him, and be saved and regenerated (Zech. 12:10-14; 14:4-5; Matt. 24:30; Rom. 11:26-27; Rev. 1:7). However, because they will be the later believers, this saved remnant of Jews will not participate in the heavenly section of the kingdom as kings and priests, but rather they will be kept on the earth to be the priests of God (Isa. 2:2-3; Zech. 8:20-23) in the earthly section of the thousand-year kingdom. This earthly section of the kingdom will be the restored nation of Israel (Acts 1:6), the kingdom of David (Mark 11:10; Luke 1:32-33; 2 Sam. 7:12-13), the tabernacle of David (Acts 15:16), where Christ as the Son of Man, David’s royal descendant, will be the King over the children of Israel, and the kingdom of the Son of Man (Matt. 13:41; Rev. 11:15). In this section of the kingdom, the Lord will sit on the throne of David and reign over the house of Jacob (the Jewish people), ruling over the nations of the earth (Psa. 2:8; 72:8; Dan. 7:14; 2:35) during the millennium.

The earthly section of the millennial kingdom will be the realm for the saved Jews to be God’s priests to teach the nations (Zech. 8:20-23; Isa. 2:2-3). Zechariah 8:23 says, “Thus says Jehovah of hosts, In those days, from all the languages of the nations, ten men will take hold, indeed, they will take hold of the skirt of a Jewish

man, saying, Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you." After the surviving Jews are saved at the Lord's coming back, they will become the priests to teach all the repentant nations to know God's way and God's person, and they will teach them to worship and serve God. As priests, they will bring the nations into the presence of God that they may be enlightened, corrected, and favored with all the riches of God.

The third category of people in the coming kingdom will be the nations, who also will belong to the earthly section of the millennium. At the end of this age a great part of the inhabitants of the earth will be killed during the sixth and seventh trumpets (Rev. 9:12-21; 11:14-18). Antichrist will persecute the believers and the Jews, God's chosen people who will be left on the earth. At this time, for the care of God's people, an eternal gospel will be preached to the nations (14:6-7), as illustrated by the parable of the net in Matthew 13:47-50. Then after the Lord returns and defeats the Antichrist and his armies, He will judge the nations on the earth not according to the law of Moses or according to the gospel of Christ but according to the particular criteria of the "eternal gospel." This is the judgment recounted in Matthew 25:31-46.¹⁰ Those who listen to that gospel and treat the suffering believers and Jews well will be blessed and reckoned as righteous to inherit the kingdom (in its earthly, not heavenly, section), but those who do not will be cursed and will perish for eternity. The former, as the "sheep" of Matthew 25, will be brought into the sphere of God's life, the earthly part of the millennium, to partake of the kingdom prepared by God for them from the foundation of the world (v. 34). They will not be saved and regenerated as the New Testament believers are. Rather, they will be restored only to the original state of man as created by God to be the people living under the kingly ruling of Christ and the overcoming believers and under the priestly ministry of the saved Jews.

By all of the above, we can see that in the millennium there will be three realms, corresponding to the three categories of people. The first will be the realm of the earth, where the blessing of God's creation, as mentioned in Genesis 1:28-30, will take place; the second, the realm of the nation of Israel in Canaan, from the Nile to the Euphrates, in which the saved Jews will rule over the earth (Isa. 60:10-12; Zech. 14:16-18); and the third, the heavenly and spiritual realm (1 Cor. 15:50-52), where the overcoming believers will enjoy the kingdom reward (Matt. 5:20; 7:21). The kingdom that the sheep will enter will be the first realm. The blessing of the first realm in the millennium, the blessing of God's creation, was prepared for the sheep from the foundation of the world (*from the foundation of the world* refers to the works of creation, Heb. 4:3), whereas the blessing of the third realm, the blessing of the heavenly and spiritual kingdom,

was ordained for the believers before the foundation of the world (referring to eternity past, Eph. 1:3-4). The first realm will partake of the "restoration of all things," which will affect not only man but also the entire creation—the heavens, the earth, the animals, and even the trees. Everything that was cursed through the fall of man will be restored. It is in this realm that the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, like the light of seven days (Isa. 30:26). It is also in this realm that the wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the kid (11:6), death will be limited, and there will be abundant life and much praise and rejoicing (65:20-25). This condition will not be miraculous on the restored earth but rather will be normal and common.

A Realm of Righteousness

We may now repeat Augustine's assessment of the opinion of those who teach a coming millennium, from *The City of God*, Book 20:

As they assert that those who then rise again shall enjoy

In order to be found worthy of the reward of the coming kingdom, the believers must live a life of the highest morality according to the constitution of the kingdom of the heavens.

the leisure of immoderate carnal banquets, furnished with an amount of meat and drink such as not only to shock the feeling of the temperate, but even to surpass the measure of credulity itself, such assertions can be believed only by the carnal. (719)

On the contrary, we assert that the coming millennial kingdom will be a realm of righteousness under the direct ruling of Christ. In order to be found worthy of the reward of the coming kingdom, the believers must live a life of the highest morality according to the constitution of the kingdom of the heavens, as revealed in Matthew 5—7. Under the kingdom's exercise, they must be poor in spirit (5:3), hunger and thirst for righteousness, endure persecution for its sake, seek it at a cost, and pursue it (vv. 6, 10; 1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22). Moreover, their righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20), and they must do the will of the Father who is in the heavens (7:21). They must walk by the Spirit and not by the flesh (Gal. 5:16-25), and they must go "forth to meet the bridegroom," the coming Christ (Matt. 25:1), by giving up the world (1 John 2:15), dealing with the self (Matt. 16:24), loving the Lord above all (Mark 12:30),

and counting all things loss for Christ (Phil. 3:8). Then in the next age, those who are rewarded with the kingdom will enjoy not mainly the blessings of the restored physical creation but the kingdom's spiritual blessings, the chief of which will be the full enjoyment of Christ as signified by the tree of life (Rev. 2:7), the hidden manna (v. 17), and the feast of the produce of the good land (3:20). This is the product of the vine, the cup of blessing (Matt. 26:29; 1 Cor. 10:16)—God Himself as our portion (Psa. 16:5)—which the overcomers will drink anew with the Lord in the kingdom of His Father. To be sure, since “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 15:50), such a reward is heavenly and spiritual, not carnal as Augustine misunderstood from false teachers. Likewise, the spiritual hope of the glory of the coming manifestation of the kingdom is not the hope for “small and mortal things,” as Dionysius charged (Eusebius 308), nor is it the hope for “bodily pleasure and luxury,” as Origen accused (Origen 297).

The saved Jews also will have undergone a radical change by the end of the present age. By the time of the Lord's second appearing, the remnant of Israel will have suffered all kinds of hardship. The Jews already have suffered the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and were scattered into many countries, where they continued to suffer persecution. Then at the end of this age, two-thirds of the Jews in all the land of Israel will be slaughtered by Antichrist, and half the city of Jerusalem will go forth into captivity. No doubt, the half which remains will no longer have any taste for human life or for acquiring possessions and high positions. They will have learned through much suffering that everything apart from God is vanity. They will realize that they are short of God, and they will repent. Then the Spirit of grace will be poured out upon them (Zech. 12:10) so that they will receive the Triune God as their enjoyment (Lee, *Zechariah* 76-77). In such a condition—not only revived and renewed but saved and regenerated—they will have no taste for “immoderate carnal banquets,” as was falsely reported to Augustine.

Moreover, even the restored nations living in the pristine condition of God's creation will be in a realm of righteousness. They will be ruled directly by Christ and His overcomers, be shepherded with an iron rod (Rev. 2:26-27), and be taught by the saved and enlightened Jews to properly worship God under His authority, order, and discipline (Zech. 14:16-21). At that time the nations will stream to the mountain of the house of Jehovah, be instructed in His ways, walk in His paths, and be under His judgment and decision to live in universal peace (Micah 4:2-3). In this peaceful kingdom on the restored earth, there will be nothing to “shock the feeling of the temperate,” as Augustine suspected. For these reasons, the reaction of the Nicene and post-Nicene age against

the millenarianism of the subapostolic and pre-Nicene centuries was not merited. Augustine himself said, “This opinion would not be objectionable, if it were believed that the joys of the saints in that Sabbath shall be spiritual, and consequent on the presence of God; for I myself, too, once held this opinion” (*City* 719). We have demonstrated that the joys of the saints in the millennium—despite the mistakes of early teachers and the misspeaking of heretics—will indeed be spiritual and altogether consequent on the presence of God and His Christ. It is regrettable that Augustine, reacting to misspeakings rather than properly understanding the truth of the millennial kingdom, became an opponent of this teaching, for by his own admission, he should have been its advocate.

The following installment of this department will continue on the course of the development of millennial beliefs, especially from the time of the Reformation. We will examine postmillennialism, critique the dispensationalism of the Brethren, and conclude with the kingdom teachings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most of all, we will endeavor to present the scriptural keys to the questions and problems raised by millennial study, and we will see more concerning the kingdom age as the final age of accomplishment in God's economy.

by John Campbell

Notes

¹It is plainly not in the scope of this brief article to provide a thorough and objective historical and theological treatment of this controversial subject. Rather, we endeavor to present an outline of this matter according to the light we have received of the Lord, focusing on crucial scriptural keys to its understanding.

²The complex sequence of all these events is made exceedingly clear by the outline of Revelation and “The Chart of the Seventy Weeks and the Coming of Christ, with the Rapture of the Saints,” by Witness Lee, in the Recovery Version of the Bible.

³The identity of this Barnabas is unsure. He is not necessarily the one mentioned in Acts 13:1-2.

⁴Chapters 32 through 36 were omitted from most manuscripts in the Middle Ages. It is probable that scribes sought to purge the writing of Irenaeus of its obvious millenarian thought, since millenarianism had been out of favor since the time of Augustine (Coxe 561).

⁵Even well after the Reformation, the critics of chiliasm still identified it with Cerinthus (Toon 10).

⁶It is indeed ironic that a millennial kingdom that the Scriptures associate with the “word of righteousness” has been rejected because of its perceived “carnal” implications, but

“heaven” with its clear carnal interpretations has not been rejected but rather promoted and glorified. Apparently, it is not acceptable to be carnal for one thousand years, but it is acceptable, laudable, and even desirable to be carnal for eternity.

⁷Augustine does not tell us to whom in particular he is referring. If the reference is to Papias and Irenaeus, for example, his accusations are harsh. The reference may be to Cerinthus, the Montanists, or other deviant teachers, either from an earlier time or concurrent with Augustine. At any rate, the grossly deteriorated chiliasm indicated by these remarks is not the pure teaching of the Bible concerning the thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth.

⁸For a fuller discussion of this subject, please see the previous two installments of this department: “Forgiveness in the Age to Come,” *Affirmation & Critique*, April 2004, pp. 56-69 and October 2004, pp. 78-95.

⁹Space and prudence do not permit us to address the concerns of dispensational and covenant theology, particularly with regard to the position of Israel in the coming kingdom. We will speak more about this in the following installment of this department. It is sufficient for the time to recognize the three-fold distinction of peoples indicated by 1 Corinthians 10:32.

¹⁰The criterion for the Lord’s judgment of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46 is their treatment of His brothers during their time of need. This is not the unique criterion of faith in Christ, which is the subject of the gospel of grace (Acts 20:24; 16:31; Eph. 2:7-8), nor is the Lord’s approval of the sheep based solely on their names being written in the book of life, as in Revelation 20:12 and 15. Thus, to equate the judgment in Matthew 25 to the judgment at the great white throne in Revelation 20 causes severe confusion. The gospel of grace brings eternal life into the believers that they may live by God’s life, whereas the “eternal gospel” will bring the sheep into eternal life that they may live in the sphere of God’s life.

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