

# Premillennialism:

## The Predominant View of the Earliest Believers

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### Introduction

Premillennialism—the belief that Christ will return before a literal thousand-year reign on earth (Revelation 20:1–6)—was the prevailing eschatological expectation of the earliest post-apostolic Christians. Known in Church history as chiliasm, this view not only rests on a straightforward reading of Scripture but also finds confirmation in the writings of the early Church Fathers.

Although later centuries witnessed the rise of allegorical and spiritualized approaches to prophecy, particularly through the Alexandrian school and Augustine, the evidence from the first three centuries demonstrates that premillennialism was the dominant hope of the primitive church.

### The Apostolic Foundation

The New Testament expectation of the "age to come" reflects Jewish apocalyptic thought, which divided history into "this age" and "the age to come," the transition from one to the other occurring by "the Day of the Lord." Isaiah envisioned a future reign of righteousness (Isaiah 66:13–16), and the book of Revelation clearly speaks of a resurrection of the righteous and a thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth, mentioning it five times in Revelation 20:1–6:

*"Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for **a thousand years**; and he threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until **the thousand years** were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time. Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for **a thousand years**. The rest of the dead did not come to life until **the thousand years***

*were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him.” (Revelation 20:1-6)*

The earliest Christians, shaped by this apocalyptic worldview, naturally carried these expectations forward, teaching a future earthly reign of the Messiah after His return.

## The Witness of the Early Church Fathers

### Papias (c. 60-130)

Papias, bishop of Hierapolis and a hearer of those who knew the apostles, reported:

“There will be a millennium after the resurrection of the dead, when the kingdom of Christ will be set up in material form on this earth.”<sup>1</sup>

“I shall not hesitate also to put into ordered form for you, along with the interpretations, everything I learned carefully in the past from the elders and noted down carefully, for the truth of which I vouch. For unlike most people I took no pleasure in those who told many different stories, but only in those who taught the truth. Nor did I take pleasure in those who reported their memory of someone else’s commandments, but only in those who reported their memory of the commandments given by the Lord to the faith and proceeding from the Truth itself. And if by chance anyone who had been in attendance on the elders arrived, I made enquiries about the words of the elders—what Andrew or Peter had said, or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord’s disciples, and whatever Aristion and John the Elder, the Lord’s disciples, were saying. For I did not think that information from the books would profit me as much as information from a living and surviving voice.”

These statements, preserved by Eusebius, represent the earliest post-apostolic affirmations of premillennial hope.



Post-Apostolic Witnesses

## Justin Martyr (c. 100-165)

In his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, Justin boldly defended the doctrine:

“But I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged, as the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare.”<sup>2</sup>

Justin directly tied his belief to the apostle John’s Revelation, noting that Christ’s followers would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem before the final judgment.<sup>3</sup>

## Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-202)

A disciple of Polycarp (who was himself a disciple of John), Irenaeus provided one of the most comprehensive defenses of chiliasm:

“John, therefore, did distinctly foresee the first ‘resurrection of the just,’ and the inheritance in the kingdom of the earth... And when this Antichrist shall have devastated all things... then the Lord will come from heaven... bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom.”<sup>4</sup>

He insisted that Abraham himself would inherit the land promise at the resurrection, tying covenantal fulfillment to the future millennial kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

## Hippolytus of Rome (d. ~235)

In his *Commentary on Daniel*, Hippolytus presented a chronological premillennialism based on the six-thousand-year world schema:

“Six thousand years must be accomplished, in order that the Sabbath may come... For the Sabbath is the type and emblem of the future kingdom of the saints, when they shall reign with Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

## Tertullian (c. 160-230)

Tertullian declared in *Against Marcion*:

“We do confess that a kingdom is promised to us upon the earth... after the resurrection for a thousand years in the divinely-built city of Jerusalem.”<sup>7</sup>



The thousand year reign

## Lactantius (c. 250-325)

In *The Divine Institutes*, Lactantius described the millennial reign in vivid detail:

“The Son of the Most High and Great God... shall restore them to the earth, and establish a great kingdom.”<sup>8</sup>

## Other Early Witnesses

- **Pseudo-Barnabas (A.D. 120-150)** taught that history would last six thousand years, after which Christ would reign during the seventh millennium of rest.<sup>9</sup>
- **Victorinus of Pettau (c. 270-303)** affirmed the literal kingdom in his *Commentary on Revelation*.<sup>10</sup>

## The Decline of Premillennialism

By the late third and fourth centuries, Gentile dominance and the influence of Greek philosophy reshaped Christian eschatology. Figures such as Clement, Origen, and later Augustine allegorized prophetic texts, turning the millennium into a spiritual symbol rather than a literal reign.

Augustine admitted that belief in a literal thousand-year kingdom had been widespread but dismissed it in favor of a spiritualized interpretation in his *City of God*.<sup>11</sup>

This shift does not negate the early consensus; rather, it confirms that premillennialism was the original majority view, later supplanted by allegory.

## Conclusion

The evidence from the earliest centuries of church history reveals that premillennialism was the prevailing eschatological view of the apostolic and sub-apostolic church. Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Lactantius, and others bore witness to the hope of Christ's earthly reign after His return.

Premillennialism, therefore, is not a modern invention but the historic faith of the earliest Christians, rooted in Scripture and faithfully transmitted by the apostolic fathers.



The first resurrection

## Notes

1. Papias, *Fragments*, 6, in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*.
2. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 80.
3. Ibid.
4. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.30.4; 5.36.3.
5. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.32.2.
6. Hippolytus, *Commentary on Daniel*.
7. Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 3.25.
8. Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 7.14, 7.26.
9. *Epistle of Barnabas*, 15.
10. Victorinus of Pettau, *Commentary on Revelation*.
11. Augustine, *City of God*, 20.7.