

Before Augustine: Why the Earliest Christians Expected a Future Kingdom on Earth

Did the earliest Christians believe the kingdom was already present—or still to come? Many modern Christians assume that amillennialism—the belief that Christ’s kingdom is primarily spiritual and presently realized—represents the historic position of the church. A future, earthly kingdom is often dismissed as a late innovation, frequently labeled “dispensationalism,” and blamed on modern prophecy charts or 19th-century theological innovations.

But when we move back before Augustine, before Christianity absorbed Greek philosophical categories and allegorical habits, we discover something striking: the earliest Christians overwhelmingly expected a future, earthly reign of the Messiah, rooted not in speculation, but in the prophets of Israel—especially Isaiah. This was not a fringe view. It was the dominant view.

Isaiah and the Shape of Early Christian Hope

To understand early Christian eschatology, we must begin where they did: with Isaiah. Isaiah does not describe a vague, timeless heaven. He speaks of “*the last days*” (Isaiah 2:2), when Zion is exalted above the nations, when the law goes forth from Jerusalem, when the Messiah judges between peoples, when war is abolished throughout the earth, and creation itself is transformed.

Later, Isaiah describes a Davidic king whose government increases without end *on the throne of David* (Isaiah 9:6–7), and a Spirit-filled ruler from the stump of Jesse who judges the poor with righteousness, strikes the wicked at His arrival, and ushers in Eden-like peace across the earth (Isaiah 11).

None of these things are abstractions. They are promises rooted in geographical, political, and historical realities.

The earliest Christians did not ask, “*How can we reinterpret this spiritually?*” They asked, “*When will this happen?*” Let’s consider a few examples.

Papias: Apostolic Memory and a Restored Earth

Papias, an early second-century bishop who claimed to have learned directly from those who knew the apostles, taught a thoroughly earthy eschatology. Preserved by Irenaeus, Papias

describes a coming age of abundance, peace, and transformed creation—language drawn straight from Isaiah 11 and 65.

“And these things are borne witness to in writing by Papias, the hearer of John, and a companion of Polycarp, in his fourth book; for there were five books compiled by him. And he says in addition, “Now these things are credible to believers.” And he says that, “when the traitor Judas did not give credit to them, and put the question, ‘How then can things about to bring forth so abundantly be wrought by the Lord?’ the Lord declared, “They who shall come to these [times] shall see.” When prophesying of these times, therefore, Isaiah says: “The wolf also shall feed with the lamb, and the leopard shall take his rest with the kid; the calf also, and the bull, and the lion shall eat together; and a little boy shall lead them. The ox and the bear shall feed together, and their young ones shall agree together; and the lion shall eat straw as well as the ox. And the infant boy shall thrust his hand into the asp’s den, into the nest also of the adder’s brood; and they shall do no harm, nor have power to hurt anything in my holy mountain.” And again he says, in recapitulation, “Wolves and lambs shall then browse together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and the serpent earth as if it were bread; and they shall neither hurt nor annoy anything in my holy mountain, saith the Lord.” I am quite aware that some persons endeavour to refer these words to the case of savage men, both of different nations and various habits, who come to believe, and when they have believed, act in harmony with the righteous. But although this is [true] now with regard to some men coming from various nations to the harmony of the faith, nevertheless in the resurrection of the just [the words shall also apply] to those animals mentioned. For God is rich in all things. And it is right that when the creation is restored, all the animals should obey and be in subjection to man, and revert to the food originally given by God (for they had been originally subjected in obedience to Adam), that is, the productions of the earth. But some other occasion, and not the present, is [to be sought] for showing that the lion shall [then] feed on straw. And this indicates the large size and rich quality of the fruits. For if that animal, the lion, feeds upon straw [at that period], of what a quality must the wheat itself be whose straw shall serve as suitable food for lions? (Against Heresies, 5.33.3–4)

This is Jewish apocalyptic hope, embraced by the earliest followers of Jesus. As Isaiah declared:

*“And the wolf will dwell with the lamb,
And the leopard will lie down with the young goat,
And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;
And a little boy will lead them.”* (Isaiah 11:6)

“They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain...” (Isaiah 11:9)

Justin Martyr: A Future Millennium in Jerusalem

Writing around AD 150, Justin Martyr openly affirmed a future, literal kingdom:

“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.” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 80)

Justin explicitly grounds his expectation in Isaiah and the prophets. He even acknowledges that some Christians disagreed—but notably, he does not treat the future kingdom as a novelty. He treats denial of it as the deviation. For Justin, Isaiah’s vision of Zion exalted and the nations streaming to Jerusalem had not yet happened. Therefore, the kingdom had not yet come yet.

Irenaeus: Isaiah, the Antichrist, and the Kingdom to Come

Irenaeus (c. AD 180), a disciple of Polycarp, who himself was a disciple of John, offers one of the most detailed eschatological frameworks in early Christianity.

He speaks plainly of a future Antichrist, a literal reign of evil before Christ’s return, Christ’s visible coming to destroy the wicked, and the inauguration of the righteous kingdom

Crucially, Irenaeus ties this directly to Isaiah’s promises of restored creation and Davidic rule:

“But when this Antichrist shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign for three years and six months, and sit in the temple at Jerusalem; and then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending this man and those who follow him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom, that is, the rest, the hallowed seventh day; and restoring to Abraham the promised inheritance, in which kingdom the Lord declared, that ‘many coming from the east and from the west should sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’” (*Against Heresies*, 5.30.4)

For Irenaeus, Isaiah 11’s vision of restored creation was not symbolic of the church age. It described the age to come, following judgment.

“With righteousness He will judge the poor... and He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked.” (Isaiah 11:4)

“Whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming.” (2 Thessalonians 2:8)

“The LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and His glory will be before His elders.” (Isaiah 24:23)

“There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom...” (Isaiah 9:7)

“Then in that day the nations will resort to the root of Jesse... and His resting place will be glorious.” (Isaiah 11:10)

Even more importantly, Irenaeus specifically tied his literalist interpretation of Isaiah directly to the elders who had received it from John the Apostle.

The predicted blessing, therefore, belongs unquestionably to the times of the kingdom, when the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead; when also the creation, having been renovated and set free, shall fructify with an abundance of all kinds of food, from the dew of heaven, and from the fertility of the earth: as the elders who saw John, the disciple of the Lord, related that they had heard from him how the Lord used to teach in regard to these times, (*Against Heresies* 5.33.3)

Tertullian: The Kingdom on Earth Before Heaven

By the early third century, Tertullian still affirms what earlier generations assumed:

“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.” (Against Marcion, 3.24)

This mirrors Isaiah’s vision: history culminating in Messiah’s reign, followed by ultimate renewal.

And it shall come to passe in the last dayes, that
the mountaine of the LORDS house shall established..

..... and many nations shall come and say,

Come, let us go vp to the mountaine

of the LORD,

to the house of

the God of Jacob...

the God of Jacob...



— Isaiah 2:6

When and Why Allegorization Took Over

So when did this expectation fade?

The shift begins in earnest with Origen and reaches dominance with Augustine in the 4th–5th centuries. As Christianity became increasingly influenced by Greek philosophy, particularly Platonic dualism, the material world came to be seen as inferior, and prophetic promises were reinterpreted spiritually.

Isaiah's kingdom became “the church.” Zion became “heaven.” Resurrection hope became “the soul's ascent” into heaven as a spirit forever. Augustine did not invent amillennialism, but he systematized it—and in doing so, broke with the earlier prophetic realism of the church. Sadly, such Greek-influenced spiritualization remains strong in some segments of the Church today.

Why This Matters Today

When modern Christians are told that belief in a future kingdom on earth is a recent invention, history tells a different story. What is often dismissed as “dispensational” is, in many respects, simply pre-Augustinian Christianity reading Isaiah plainly.

More importantly, this matters pastorally.

Isaiah's vision is good news for the poor, the oppressed, the suffering, a groaning creation. A future kingdom means injustice does not have the last word. It means resurrection, restoration, and righteous rule are still ahead—not merely symbolic, not already exhausted.

The earliest Christians lived, suffered, and died with that hope. And they got it—not from charts or systems—but from Isaiah.

