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## The Doctrine of Chiliasm in the Life of the Early Church

The Ancient Church, or the Early Church, expected a close coming of end times. This belief is reflected indirectly in some verses of the New Testament (i.e., Luke 12:32; Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:29), as well as, by the fact that the disciples went to Jerusalem after the resurrection, waiting for the promise of restoration be fulfilled (Acts 1:4-7). The returning of Christ was however delayed. Various theological reflections were born to interpret this delay.

A positive explanation is described in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, in the elaboration of the parable of the building of a tower (where the tower is the Church, and the stones of which it is built are the faithful): works are delayed with the purpose of providing sinners a chance for repentance, to be built into the tower as holy stones.<sup>1</sup> Another argument also became relevant during the apologetic discourse with the heathen environment: the world received a temporary chance against the upcoming destruction. ‘And to me there is no doubt but that the earth abides through the supplication of the Christians.’<sup>2</sup>

A change occurred shortly after: praying for parousia was replaced by praying for the delay of the Second Coming. Eschatological focus on the fulfilment of the prophecy on the end of history was transposed to the rising of the dead; this turning is quite individual. As a subterranean stream, the model which emphasized the historicity of salvation – i. e.: Chiliasm – remained however.

Mostly based on Revelation 20, the Judeo-Christian tradition started to presuppose the coming of God’s reign yet to earth after the Destruction of Jerusalem (*Bar Kokhba* revolt, A. D. 135). The doctrine of Chili-

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<sup>1</sup> Herm (v) III 5, 5.

<sup>2</sup> The Apology of Aristides, part XVI; translated to English from the Syriac: [www.tertullian.org/fathers](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers)

asm in the life of the Early Church was a local phenomenon to Asia Minor, due to the large Judaic diaspora throughout the region.

*Justin Martyr* (aka. Saint *Justin*, c. 100 – 165 AD) placed serious emphasis upon eschatology. The Second Coming of Jesus would commence with the renewal of the earth and the sky, when Christians would inherit Heavenly Jerusalem. *Saint Justin* spoke about one thousand years in Jerusalem, as he also combined Isaiah 65:17-25 and Psalms 90:4, therefore one thousand year was actually “one day.” He did not describe the features of the one thousand years empire; theologians therefore concluded that the millennial reign was just spiritual reality for him<sup>3</sup>.

Similarly to the *Ebionites*, Hebrew-Christian *Cherintos* also “professed” the earthly kingdom of God, but he described it in such a sensualistic manner, that the entire Book of Revelation was actually put to shame. *Cherintos’* interpretation promised fulfilment by worldly pleasures (only); and he believed that comminative *psalms* “shall be brought to pass.” No wonder that the Church pronounced him heretic. Church-fathers strongly opposed this kind of approach.

*Papias’* millennialism, which rooted in the literal interpretation of the Book of Revelation, but most probably also inspired by Biblical apocrypha, had a great influence in the 2nd century AD. The essence of this doctrine was that the promised blessings would be fulfilled during the earthly kingdom, soil would produce abundant harvest, right-minded Christians *would* be resurrected of the dead for ruling, and renewed creatures *would* be set free.

*Tertullian* might have been inspired of this source. Church-history writer *Eusebius* was not at all enthusiastic about *Papias’* millennialism. *On the contrary, he had strong doubts regarding Papias’ intellectual capacity. Eusebius* believed that *Papias’* millennialism was a mere invention by the misinterpretation of the teachings by the apostles and some peculiar parables by the Lord.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Vanyó László: Bevezetés az ókeresztény kor dogmatörténetébe. Szent István Társulat, Budapest – 1998. p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> Vanyó László: Idem. p. 191.

## The Development of the Interpretation of Chiliasm in the Life of the Early Church

Typically, historic-teleological eschatology was born in Asia Minor as an answer to over-spiritualized Gnostic eschatology. *Irenaeus* (+202) described a real epoch of salvation on earth; a time for training, development and maturity, which would lead to final glory. Christ's expected earthly realm has an important intermediary role between the current world and the coming, full glory. This provides continuity between creation, arrival and final fulfilment.

*Irenaeus* accepted the millennialism of Papias, by complementing it with the aforementioned prophecy of Isaiah. He considered that righteousness had already been re-established within the Church, by the peaceful relations between humans and animals, as well as, brotherhood of people and nations.

*Lactantius* (+after 317), a competent convert who was interested in philosophical dialogue, described the thousand years kingdom to come as a harmonic balance of Old Testament apocalypse and Revelation visions with the antic Greek-Roman ideals of a golden age; at the same time, the sorrows of hundreds of years of persecution were felt.

“...Christ shall descend with great power (...) and all that multitude of the wicked shall be destroyed, and torrents of blood shall flow, (...) and the earth, harassed through so many years, may rest. (...) and this kingdom of the righteous shall be for a thousand years. Throughout that time the stars shall be more brilliant, and the brightness of the sun shall be increased, and the moon shall not be subject to decrease. (...) the earth shall bring forth all her fruit without the labour of men. Honey shall drop from rocks, fountains of milk and wine shall abound. (...) For God shall supply to all abundant and harmless food. (...) But when the thousand years shall be fulfilled, (...) the prince of the demons [will be] loosed...”<sup>5</sup>

The full turn by Constantine brought peace for the Church, after cruel persecution. This might have been a reason that the interest for

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<sup>5</sup> Chap. LXXII. – Of Christ Descending from Heaven to the General Judgment, and of the Millenarian Reign. [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org).

Chiliasm decreased, as *Jenő Sebestyén* formulated it: *The period of calmness brought by Constantine the Great was not favourable for Chiliasm, which used to resurface during huge world crises of human history.*<sup>6</sup> Some young authors were only inspired by Chiliasm, e.g., *Apollinaris of Laodicea* and his disciples in the east. Traces of Chiliasm were detected in *Ambrosian* writings.

As persecution ceased, *Augustine of Hippo* (354-430) gave a new interpretation to Chiliasm, as to a real eschatological event. His related ideas influenced theological thinking for many hundred years. Despite first identifying with Chiliasm, he later separated himself from its doctrines, and stifled any efforts of distributing them upon their early state (XX, 7). *Civitate Dei*, the realm ruled by Christ in the community of saints is: the Church. He considers that the binding of Satan means: no power upon the redeemed of Christ.

A spiritualized image of the millennium is depicted; where the “first resurrection” means a resurrection from the sin of “souls” by the word of Christ, which today would be called: repentance. For him, the “thousand-year kingdom” is not a political setting, but a spiritual one, which is linked to the process of gaining faith for the individual. Naturally, the one-thousand-year is not a time-concept, but a state of the soul, a symbol of perfectness.

*Augustine's* oeuvre opened way to allegorical interpretations, which soon became the official interpretations for the ruling Church, i.e., which received political power. These interpretations then excluded all the ‘disturbing elements’ from the ‘millennium idea,’ from the perspective of the Church. Related hope therefore faded inside the Church; thoughts upon the one-thousand-years realm vanished. This was one of the principle teachings that *Augustine* influenced Christian theology with for many centuries.

Chiliasm however influenced the “adoring trends,” which occurred time to time within the Church, a lot, and also affected numerous heretic movements (i.e., sects), outside the Church. Heretic movements rejected *Augustine's* interpretation, either calculating the expected time of

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<sup>6</sup> In: *A dogmatika kézikönyve*. Ed.: Schneider, Theodor. Vigilia Kiadó, Budapest, 1977, p. 413

the millennium, or, by renewing the apocalyptic state of mind of Jewish anticipation, they depicted the period with shining, bright colours<sup>7</sup>.

### Excursus: Chiliasm Crassus et Mitigatus

Chiliasm had two major trends in the history of theology. One of them was a rough, harsh, literal interpretation, known as *chiliasmus crassus*. Jewish apocalyptic literature, the works of the *Ebionites* and *Cherintos* described the millennial kingdom as a physical reality, including far-reaching hedonism of earthly and sensual pleasures.

Mostly *Dionysius of Alexandria*, *Saint Jerome* and *Augustine* opposed this kind of harsh interpretation. As a consequence, in his decree of 496, Pope *Gelasius* declared Chiliasm literature to have the same status as the apocrypha.

The second trend of Chiliasm was milder, referred as to *chiliasmus mitigates*. This trend expected that biblical conditions of the paradise return before judgment day. The resurrected true, right-minded Christians would rule with Christ, while the captured Satan would be bound and powerless. After one thousand years, the others would also be raised from the death.

This idea was confessed by *Papias*, *Justin*, *Irenaeus*, *Tertullian*, and by *Joachim a Fiore* and his followers, in the Middle Age.

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<sup>7</sup> Karner Károly: Apokalipszis. Evangélikus Sajtóosztály, Budapest, 1990, p. 197.

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