

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the
21st-Century Church

Michael J. Sviel

Go Deeper Excursus 9 The Advent and Advance of Amillennialism

Notwithstanding efforts to push the presence of amillennialism back to the beginning of the patristic period,¹ no clear, direct evidence of an amillennial eschatology can be found in the first and second centuries. Ironically, for proof of the existence of an amillennial eschatology, we must depend on the writings of premillennialists. However, we are able to cobble together the beginnings of amillennial and antichilastic eschatology primarily in the school of Alexandria with Clement and Origen.

Nonchilastic Eschatology of Clement of Alexandria

The writings of the late second-century theologian Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) likely held to a spiritual view of the kingdom and may very well fit the category of “pious Christians” to whom Justin refers when he speaks of those who hold to the true faith but think differently about eschatological events (*Dial.* 80). Clement seems to have planned a book called *On the Resurrection*, as he wrote, “Though cut down, we spring up again, as will be shown at greater length in the book *On the Resurrection*” (*Instructor* 2.11 [ANF 2]). This brief statement points to Clement’s belief that the same body that dies will in some way rise again. He notes that the full reception of “light” and “perfection” by humanity is “reserved till the resurrection of those who believe,” when believers will receive “the promise previously made” (*Instructor* 1.6). Clement reveals a realized—and thus spiritualized—eschatology when he interprets Jesus’ promise to “raise him up in the last day” as presently fulfilled: “As far as possible in this world, which is what he means by the last day, and which is preserved till the time that it shall end, we believe that we are made perfect” (*Instructor* 1.6).

¹ Hill Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). Cf. Dom Cyril Pasquier, *Approches du millénium: Et si Irénée de Lyon avait raison?*, *Studia Oecumenica Friburgensia*, no. 103 (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2021), 38 : “Chronologiquement, les Pères de l’église millénaristes sont apparus avant les auteurs anti-millénaristes.”

He later expounds on this tension between the already and the not-yet aspects of our eternal life: “But faith is not lame in any respect; nor after our departure from this world does it make us who have believed, and received without distinction the earnest of future good, wait; but having in anticipation grasped by faith that which is future, after the resurrection we receive it as present.... And where faith is, there is the promise; and the consummation of the promise is rest” (*Instructor* 1.6). Clement argues that although Christ promised to put an end to the works of evil desire, birth, and corruption experienced by humanity, this has only been partially fulfilled in the present age.² Clement applies a dual-interpretation hermeneutic to his prophecy. In the present age, the promise of destroying the works of desire is fulfilled spiritually. In the redeemed, the desire for vice has been replaced by the desire for virtue. The birth of vice that had led to the soul’s corruption brought spiritual death.

Ultimately for Clement, the destination of believers and the object of their hope is heavenly, not earthly: “As soon as we are regenerated, we are honoured by receiving the good news of the hope of rest, even the Jerusalem above, in which it is written that milk and honey fall in showers, receiving through what is material the pledge of the sacred food. ‘For meats are done away with,’ as the apostle himself says; but this nourishment on milk leads to the heavens, rearing up citizens of heaven, and members of the angelic choirs” (*Instructor* 1.6). In this context, the reference to “milk and honey” is certainly metaphorical or spiritual, not to actual physical milk and honey—“for we drink in the word, the nutriment of the truth” (*Instructor* 1.6). This is in keeping with the heavenly, spiritual aspiration in Clement’s soteriology. Christ’s teaching “leads to heaven” and brings the faithful child of instruction “to anchor in the haven of heaven” (*Instructor* 1.7). Indeed, the Christian life is a “journey to heaven” (*Instructor* 3.7). And in *Miscellanies*, he notes that “those who have been rightly reared in the words of truth, and received provision for eternal life, wing their way to heaven” (*Miscellanies* 1.1).

Clement interprets language and imagery from Isaiah 11:7—which premillennialists have interpreted as ultimately referring to the future messianic age—as applying to the present reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles (*Miscellanies* 6.6). He also concludes that the church has inherited the promises made to Israel, quoting a passage that does not seem to exist in any extant literature: “Accordingly it is added more clearly, ‘Thou hast inherited the covenant of Israel,’ speaking to those called from among the nations” (*Miscellanies* 2.6). This seems to be a major basis of Clement’s supersessionism with regard to Israel.

In discussing the meaning of the seven days of purification after a person dies, Clement ponders whether “the time be that which through the seven periods (ἑπτὰ περιόδων) enumerated returns to the chiefest rest (ἀνάπαυσιν).” That this “rest” is a reference to the seventh day, not the eighth that follows, is clear when one recalls the statement a few lines earlier: “For on the seventh day the rest (ἡ ἀνάπαυσις) is celebrated” (*Miscellanies* 4.25). It is possible, given Clement’s high

² In this connection Clement is responding to an interpretation of false teachers using the apocryphal *Gospel of the Egyptians* (see *Miscellanies* 3.9).

regard for Barnabas, that he is referring to that earlier author's concept of a series of historical time periods of a thousand years each, with the future seventh period characterized as the "Sabbath rest." However, it is also possible that Clement interprets the seventh period of rest symbolically as eternal rest, not an intermediate period followed by the eighth eternal day, as it is in Barnabas.³

With regard to cosmic renewal, Clement sees parallels between Greek teachings and Christian theology with respect to eschatological expectations. For example, Empedocles "speaks thus physically of the renewal of all things (φυσικῶς οὕτως τῆς τῶν πάντων ἀναλήψεως μέμνηται), as consisting in a transmutation into the essence of fire (εἰς τὴν τοῦ πυρὸς οὐσίαν μεταβολῆς), which is to take place" (*Miscellanies* 5.14). Almost all traces of a future physical renewal of this earth have been lost in Clement's spiritualized eschatology. The Alexandrian school in general seems to have set a course in which cosmic eschatology is conflated with personal eschatology. In addressing birth and death, Clement notes, "By natural necessity in the divine plan death follows birth, and the coming together of soul and body is followed by their dissolution. If birth exists for the sake of learning and knowledge, dissolution leads to the final restoration" (*Miscellanies* 3.9).⁴ This "final restoration" comes after death, but only for the righteous. Clement notes that for "the good," the "hope after death" is "good hope," while for "the bad" it is the opposite (*Miscellanies* 4.22). He asserts, "If we live throughout holily and righteously, we are happy here, and shall be happier after our departure hence; not possessing happiness for a time, but enabled to rest in eternity" (*Miscellanies* 5.14).

Clement's body-soul dualism and his emphasis on the eternal blessedness of the soul lead him to occasionally regard physical death—the separation of soul and body—as a blessing.⁵ He writes, "The severance, therefore, of the soul from the body, made a life-long study, produces in the philosopher gnostic alacrity, so that he is easily able to bear natural death, which is the dissolution of the chains which bind the soul to the body" (*Miscellanies* 4.3). And more clearly, "The soul which has chosen the best life—the life that is from God and righteousness—exchanges earth for heaven" (*Miscellanies* 4.26). So, during this life, people are not "able to apprehend God clearly," but they will see God "when they arrive at the final perfection" (*Miscellanies* 5.1). It seems Clement relies greatly on the personal eschatology of Greek philosophy, especially Socrates, whose hope is in life after death, the soul separate from the body, experiencing immortal life (*Miscellanies* 5.2).

³ See discussion of the relationship between Clement of Alexandria and Barnabas in Go Deeper Excursus 7.

⁴ Translation for Book 3 of *Miscellanies* is from Henry Chadwick, ed., *Alexandrian Christianity, The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954).

⁵ Clement's body-soul dualism is seen clearly in *Miscellanies* 4.26—"The soul of man is confessedly the better part of man, and the body the inferior. But neither is the soul good by nature, nor, on the other hand, is the body bad by nature.... The constitution of man, then, which has its place among things of sense, was necessarily composed of things diverse, but not opposite—body and soul."

The Antichiliasm of Origen, Dionysius, and Eusebius

Clement's hyper-spiritualized and hyper-realized eschatology, which has no room for an earthly kingdom, makes way for Origen of Alexandria's antichiliasm of the later third century. However, his harshest words seem to have in mind a carnal chiliasm reminiscent of Cerinthus rather than the premillennialism of Irenaeus of Lyons. In *First Principles* 2.11.2, Origen writes:

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 fulfilment of the promises of the future are to be looked for in bodily pleasure and luxury; and therefore they especially desire to have again, after the resurrection, such bodily structures as may never be without the power of eating, and drinking, and performing all the functions of flesh and blood, not following the opinion of the Apostle Paul regarding the resurrection of a spiritual body. And consequently they say, that after the resurrection there will be marriages, and the begetting of children, imagining to themselves that the earthly city of Jerusalem is to be rebuilt.... And to speak shortly, according to the manner of things in this life in all similar matters, do they desire the fulfilment of all things looked for in the promises, viz., that what now is should exist again. Such are the views of those who, while believing in Christ, understand the divine Scriptures in a sort of Jewish sense, drawing from them nothing worthy of the divine promises. (*Princ.* 2.11.2 [ANF 4])

Origen's antichiliasm position clumsily conflates elements of classic Irenaean premillennialism and Cerinthian carnal chiliasm, which Irenaeus himself rejected. This "carnal chiliasm" is found in Eusebius's excerpt from a third-century work recounting a dialogue between Gaius of Rome and Proclus, a Montanist interlocutor. Gaius reported that Cerinthus taught "that after the resurrection the kingdom of Christ will be upon the earth and once again the flesh will live in Jerusalem governed by the flesh, to serve lusts and pleasures. He is an enemy of the scriptures of God, and wishing to lead people astray, he says that the 'marriage feast' will last for a period of a thousand years" (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.28.2 [Schott]). Eusebius also quotes from Dionysius of Alexandria's third-century work, *On Promises*, which relays that Cerinthus taught that "the kingdom of Christ would be upon the earth, and being a lover of the body and utterly carnal, he dreamt that it would consist of the things he desired, the belly and the things that fill the belly, that is food, drink, and marriages and the 'festivals,' 'sacrifices,' and 'slaughter of holy victims'" (*Hist. eccl.* 3.28.4–5). That Eusebius also relies on Irenaeus, the premillennialist, for information about the false teacher Cerinthus (3.28.6) demonstrates that the problematic element of Cerinthus's eschatology was not the fact of an earthly millennial kingdom per se but its radically carnal character. It appears, too, that later fathers regarded the observance of Jewish festivals and sacrifices as an objectionable element belonging to carnal chiliasm.

Yet in Origen’s imprecise, polemical conflation of elements of Irenaean premillennialism and Cerinthian carnal chiliasm, Origen bequeaths upon future generations what amounts to a false choice. Uninformed readers must side with either an absurdly literal millennialism that any reasonable Christian would reject, or an extreme spiritual understanding of eschatology in which almost everything becomes an allegory or symbol for spiritual or heavenly truths. The influence of Origen of Alexandria on subsequent thinkers, especially in the East, can hardly be exaggerated. His antichiliasm quickly became the approach of many in both the East and the West.

Origen’s disciple and successor in Alexandria, Dionysius (c. 190–265), was also an antichiliasm, but he took the further step of attempting to sever the relationship between the book of Revelation and the apostle John, which would place in question—for a short season—its full canonical status.⁶ Though he appealed to his own diligent critical analysis of the book in comparison with John’s other writings, the main motivation for casting doubt on Revelation was the chiliasm that resulted from a literal reading of the text by Cerinthus (see Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.25.1–27). Dionysius, though, distanced himself from people like Gaius of Rome and the heretics known as the *Alogi*, who rejected both the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation as written by Cerinthus himself.⁷

Dionysius himself had been provoked to a deeper antichiliasm in light of the writing of one Nepos, a third-century bishop of Arsinoe and author of a lost work titled *Refutation of the Allegorists*. Nepos’ work had been directed toward what he perceived as a hyper-spiritualizing of biblical texts by Origen and the Alexandrian school, especially prophetic writings.⁸ Eusebius relays that Nepos “taught in a more Jewish manner that the promises made to the saints in the divine writings should be construed in a more Jewish manner, and supposed that there will be a period of one thousand years of corporeal luxury upon this withered earth.” Dionysius himself, praising Nepos for his faith and piety, regarding him as a true brother, complained that his writing had damaged the faith of others by persuading them “to put their hope in a kingdom of God that is meager and mortal and like things are now” (quoted in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.24.2 [Schott]). Nepos having died, Dionysius gathered together a group of those who had followed the premillennial doctrines and successfully persuaded them to abandon their views (*Hist. eccl.* 7.24.6–9).

Certainly, if Dionysius of Alexandria had fully imbibed Origen’s antichiliasm and allegorical hermeneutic, even Irenaeus’s balanced incarnational premillennialism would have sounded like extreme literalism. Like Origen, the antichiliasm present a false choice—either an excessively carnal, worldly, meager, “Jewish” kingdom or a spiritual, heavenly, glorious, “Christian” kingdom.

⁶ However, we have seen that the book of Revelation had been deemed as Johannine and canonical universally throughout the second century. Note especially its inclusion in the Muratorian fragment (c. AD 180), a description of the New Testament books received as apostolic, prophetic, and therefore canonical at least in Rome during the second century (Charles E. Hill, “The Debate over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon,” *WTJ* 57 [1997]: 437–52). Regarding the Book of Revelation, the Muratorian canon says that Paul wrote to seven churches just as the apostle John had done—that is, the letters to the seven churches in Rev 2–3; and the church explicitly received the Apocalypse of John as canonical.

⁷ But see Charles E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2004), 172–204.

⁸ See Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, 60–61.

Whether his disputants leaned toward carnal chiliasm or the more classic Irenaeian form, we cannot be sure. The report comes to us from Dionysius's own self-congratulatory report, filtered through Eusebius's excerpt; the writings of Nepos are missing. Yet Dionysius's words also reveal that even in the third century, premillennialists like Nepos and those who followed him were regarded as true Christians, simply thought to have been misled by an over-literal interpretation of prophetic texts.

We have already noted the antichilastic prejudice of Eusebius of Caesarea as it manifested itself in his characterization of Papias of Hierapolis. Eusebius is often associated with a view of the millennium that at times alternates between an amillennial and a postmillennial perspective. He was certainly opposed to the earlier church's premillennialism. He took great pains to try to distance Papias from any close connection to the apostle John and to drive a wedge between the apostle John and the book of Revelation. At times, Eusebius sounds conventionally amillennial in his outlook. At other times—especially as it relates to the rise of Constantine—he appears to have understood those pro-Christian political developments as a kind of realization of the kingdom in the world.⁹

Christopher Bonura summarizes this thesis: “Eusebius suggested that the eternal kingdom of heaven really had arrived in the form of the Roman Empire itself, with Constantine replacing Christ as the herald and ruler of that kingdom.”¹⁰ However, Bonura rightly questions the thesis, arguing persuasively, “With the possible exception of a few marginal figures, no Byzantines identified the empire as God's eternal kingdom, nor did they believe that the emperor had replaced Christ, *chromimetic* though his office might be.”¹¹ Rather, he argues, “Eusebius evidently held that the Roman Empire was the fourth kingdom of Daniel—a worldly and mortal empire—and repeatedly expressed an expectation that an everlasting eschatological kingdom would dawn only at Christ's second coming.”¹² Yet hermeneutically, Eusebius and Origen were cut from the same cloth; or, better, Origen's cloth provided the thread from which Eusebius spun his yarn. In his commentary on Isaiah, for instance, Eusebius applied the vivid imagery of 11:1–9 entirely to the present church in a spiritual sense: “Even the rapacious and greedy *wolves* among people will turn from their depravity, and their souls will flock together as tame and meek lambs in one church.... And others, whose dispositions could have been likened to *lions*, abandoned their savage-hearted and flesh-eating ways, and *they shall graze* together with the newborn in the church as *calves and*

⁹ Dom Cyril Pasquier calls Eusebius's “modèle théocratique” as one of four models “exclues de cet espace d'orthodoxie” because of its extreme earthiness and present realization (*Approches du millénium: Et si Irénée de Lyon avait raison?*, Studia Oecumenica Friburgensia, no. 103 [Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2021], 137).

¹⁰ Christopher Bonura, “Eusebius of Caesarea, the Roman Empire, and the Fulfillment of Biblical Prophecy: Reassessing Byzantine Imperial Eschatology in the Age of Constantine, *CH* 90.3 (2021): 513. He cites Stephen Shoemaker: “Eusebius [in the *Tricennial Oration*] equates Constantine with Christ, and likewise, the empire with Christ's heavenly Kingdom. In effect, the coming of the Kingdom of God that Christ promised has now been realized, according to Eusebius, in the Roman Empire” (Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018], 40).

¹¹ Bonura, “Eusebius of Caesarea,” 514.

¹² Bonura, “Eusebius of Caesarea,” 514.

bulls, and they shall partake of the same nourishment of the divine Scriptures.”¹³ Gone are the days of understanding these passages in the both/and manner of Irenaeus, which respected the text and honored the church.

However, by the fifth century amillennialism seems to have become the standard in most elite ecclesiastical circles.¹⁴ Augustine of Hippo represents what became the common amillennial view for much of the medieval and even Protestant era.¹⁵ He wrote:

Now, those who, on the strength of this passage, got the notion that the first resurrection was to be a bodily one, were influenced in this direction mainly by the matter of the thousand years. The notion was that the saints were destined to enjoy so protracted a sabbath of repose, a holy leisure, that is, after the labors of the six thousand years stretching from the creation of man, his great sin, and merited expulsion from the happiness of paradise into the unhappiness of this mortal life. The interpretation was worked out in the light of the Scripture text: “One day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” Thus, there was supposed to follow upon the six thousand years taken as six days a seventh day—or sabbath—taking up the last thousand, and to be given over to the resurrecting saints for celebration. One might put up with such an interpretation if it included belief in some spiritual delights accruing to the saints from the Lord’s company during that sabbath rest. In fact, I myself at one time accepted such an opinion. But when these interpreters say that the rising saints are to spend their time in limitless gormandizing with such heaps of food and drink as not only go beyond all sense of decent restraint but go utterly beyond belief, then such an interpretation becomes wholly unacceptable save to

¹³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentary on Isaiah*, trans. Jonathan J. Armstrong, ed. Joel E. Elowsky, *Ancient Christian Texts*, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Gerald L. Bray (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 64–65. Italics in original.

¹⁴ In the polemical back-and-forth between primarily amillennial and premillennial perspectives, it has sometimes been suggested that the ecumenical councils of Constantinople (381) and Ephesus (431) condemned premillennialism as heresy. This was allegedly done through the language of Constantinople that Christ’s kingdom “shall have no end.” However, it has been shown that classic Irenaeian premillennialism of the second century—and its close siblings—all affirmed an eternal reign of Christ; the millennium was merely the first phase in an eternal kingdom. The claim of a condemnation at Constantinople has been soundly refuted (Francis X. Gumerlock, “Millennialism and the Early Church Councils: Was Chiliasm Condemned at Constantinople?” *FH* 36.2 [2004]: 83–95). At the council of Ephesus, though some oriental bishops who supported Nestorius did make some disparaging comments in passing about chiliasm, nothing remotely close to a condemnation of premillennialism occurred at that council (Michael J. Svigel, “The Phantom Heresy: Did the Council of Ephesus (431) Condemn Chiliasm?” *TrinJ* 24.1 [2003]: 105–112). The fact is, though premillennialism did wane since its heyday in the second century, some continued to express and defend it, including Commodian (third century, though some date his writings in the fifth), Victorinus of Pettau (late third century), Methodius of Olympus, and Lactantius (late third to early fourth century). See discussions in Daley, *Hope of the Early Church*, 61–63; 64; 65–68; 162–64; Pasquier *Approches du millénium*, 148–51.

¹⁵ Bredero writes, “Basing itself on the interpretations given by St. Augustine, [the medieval church] understood the thousand-year rule of the saints as the period of the church’s present existence on earth, from its founding until judgment day. History was usually divided into six periods paralleling the six days of creation. The sixth day had begun at Christ’s birth and would continue until the end of time. In this scene the antichrist was supposed to be near” (Adriaan H. Bredero, *Christendom and Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 97.

the carnal-minded. But the spiritual-minded term those who can swallow the literal interpretation of the thousand years “Chiliasts” (from the Greek, *chilias*, ‘a thousand’) or “Millenarians” (from the corresponding Latin word). To refute them point by point would take too long. My present obligation will be, rather, to show how the Scriptural passage in question ought to be understood. (*Civ.* 20.7)¹⁶

Historical evidence actually suggests not only an intentional mischaracterization of the doctrines of early premillennialists but also an attempt to suppress the testimonies themselves. Grant observes with regard to Book 5 of *Against Heresies*: “The *Sacra Parallela* ascribed to John of Damascus (eighth century) are still willing to provide an excerpt from *Heresies* 5.36, but the millenarian chapters 32–36 are entirely absent from two significant Latin manuscripts of *Heresies*. Obviously.... they were suppressed, perhaps in the fifth century—though not in the East. The principal opponents of the older view were the Gnostics and, later, the Christian Platonists of Alexandria, whose opinions Eusebius shared.”¹⁷ We could probably add to this the fact that Papias’s five books are completely lost to us today—the effect of intentional neglect. Lost, too, are writings of other known premillennialists like Justin Martyr (cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.6.2). Perhaps, too, the original ending of Didache 16 was intentionally forsaken because of its chiliastic content.

Given the fact that early premillennial testimonies were intentionally suppressed by later ecclesiastics, one is left wondering how extensive the suppression of second-century voices was carried. Are other missing works from prominent second-century fathers lost to us because of their eschatological content: that is, the missing works of Melito of Sardis (especially his lost work on the *Apocalypse of John*; cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.4), Apollinaris of Hierapolis (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.27), and even Theophilus of Antioch’s *Against the Heresy of Hermogenes*, which relies on the book of Revelation (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.24)? Would it be equally absurd to wonder whether the missing material in two passages of the anonymous *Epistle to Diognetus* (7.6; 10.8) was excised for theological reasons, considering both lacunae occur at points when eschatological issues began to be discussed?¹⁸

Of course, we cannot be sure exactly how broadly represented chiliastic teachings would be if we had access to everything written during the second century. However, we can assume that the ecclesiastical thought leaders of the fourth century and beyond, who demonstrably criticized and attempted to suppress clear premillennial voices of the second century, would have simultaneously

¹⁶ Translation is from *Saint Augustine: City of God, Books XVII–XXII*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Daniel J. Honan, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 24 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1954), 265–66. For a detailed account of Augustine’s transition from premillennial to amillennial eschatology, see Pasquier, *Approches du millénium*, 159–328.

¹⁷ Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 39.

¹⁸ *Diognetus* 7.6 says, “For he will send him as judge, and who will endure his coming?” (Brannan). Brannan notes, “The manuscript has a lacuna at this point, with a marginal note from the copyist noting the break was also in his exemplar.” *Diognetus* 10.8 breaks off after it reads, “Then you will admire those who endure the temporary fire for the sake of righteousness and will consider them blessed when you know that fire” (Brannan). The text also notes a lacuna here.

amplified any clear amillennial voices from the same time had there actually been any. The fact that a handful of premillennial voices still survived under those conditions, while no orthodox amillennial voices survived, pleads for an explanation.