

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

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

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Go Deeper Excursus 5

Ancient and Modern Challenges to Early Premillennial Testimonies

Challenges to the idea that premillennial eschatology was the earliest widespread and well-developed eschatology in the fathers of the church has come in a variety of forms. Sometimes attempts have been made to cordon off early Christian premillennialism to a particular region of Asia Minor. For example, Brian Daley writes, “Our evidence for early Asiatic theology is second-hand and fragmentary, but it suggests that at least some Christian communities in this region cherished the hope of a coming ‘millennium’ similar to that expressed in the Johannine Apocalypse.”¹ However, I have demonstrated that early witnesses to an intermediate kingdom come not from Asia Minor but from other regions—Syria (via Didache) and Egypt (via Barnabas).

Another approach is the attempt to associate millennialism with “Jewish Christianity” or with a particular Johannine community or narrow line of succession from teacher to disciple, without directly associating the view with the apostle John personally. For example, in the fifth century, Jerome writes that Papias of Hierapolis “is said to have published the Jewish opinion of one thousand years...at the Second Coming, a view shared by Irenaeus, Apollinaris, and others, who claim that after the resurrection the Lord will reign in the flesh with the saints. Tertullian also, in his work *On the Hope of the Faithful*, Victorinus of Pettau, and Lactantius are attracted by this same view” (Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 18).² Yet Jerome follows Eusebius of Caesarea (fourth century) in attempting to drive a wedge between Papias and the apostle John.³ Eusebius first quotes Irenaeus’s testimony that Papias was a “hearer of John (ὁ Ἰωάννου μὲν ἀκουστής/*Joannis auditor*), and a companion of Polycarp” (*Haer.* 5.33.4; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.1).

¹ Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1991), 17–18. Cf. Fernando Rivas Rebaque, “‘Quienes Fueren Dignos de Morar en los Cielos, Entrarán en Ellos’ (*Adversus Haereses* V,36,1). Ireneo de Lyon Milenarista,” *Cauriensia* 16 (2022): 811–817.

² Translation from Thomas P. Halton, *Saint Jerome: On Illustrious Men*, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 100 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 37.

³ While Eusebius expressed no doubt about Polycarp’s relationship with apostles and eyewitnesses and associates of the Lord (*Hist. eccl.* 3.36.1), he is reluctant to allow a similar close relationship for Papias, though the two lived in the same generation about 100 miles apart.

Eusebius has no problems reporting that Polycarp of Smyrna had been a “disciple of the apostles (τῶν ἀποστόλων ὁμιλητής),” appointed to his office by eyewitnesses of the Lord (*Hist. eccl.* 3.36.1). Yet when it comes to Papias, Polycarp’s contemporary about 130 miles away, Eusebius labors hard to drive a wedge between Papias and the apostle John. However, in the *Chronicon* of the same Eusebius—at least as it has come down to us—the historian states that both Παππίας [*sic*] Ἱεραπολίτης καὶ Πολύκαρπος Σμύρνης... ἀκουσται John, τὸν θεολόγον καὶ ἀπόστολον.⁴ It does seem rather strange, though, that Papias, the older of the two, would have had no contact with the surviving eyewitnesses of Jesus in the first century (including the apostle John), while his younger colleague Polycarp did.

Eusebius attempts to challenge Irenaeus regarding Papias’s relationship with John by what amounts to a misinterpretation of Papias’s own words: “So writes Irenaeus about this. Papias, however, in the *prooimion* of his works does not indicate that he was an eyewitness or hearer of the holy apostles at all, but teaches that he received the matters of the faith from those who had been familiar with them” (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.2 [Schott]). Eusebius proceeds to quote from the passage in Papias that allegedly proves his point:

I will not hesitate to set down for you, along with my interpretations, everything I carefully learned then from the elders and carefully remembered, guaranteeing their truth. For unlike most people I did not enjoy those who have a great deal to say, but those who teach the truth. Nor did I enjoy those who recall someone else’s commandments, but those who remember the commandments given by the Lord to the faith and proceeding from the truth itself. And if by chance someone who had been a follower of the elders (τοῖς πρεσβυτέροις) should come my way, I inquired about the words of the elders (τῶν πρεσβυτέρων)—what Andrew or Peter said (εἶπεν), or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord’s disciples (ἕτερος τῶν τοῦ κυρίου μαθητῶν), and whatever Aristion and the elder John (ὁ πρεσβύτερος), the Lord’s disciples (οἱ τοῦ κυρίου μαθηταί), were saying (λέγουσιν). For I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as information from a living and abiding voice. (Papias of Hierapolis, as quoted by Eusebius)⁵

Eusebius then points out the repetition of the name “John,” concluding that the first—listed with men such as Peter, James, Matthew, and the other apostles—refers to the apostle John who wrote the Gospel that bears his name. He then asserts that the second mention of “John” was someone other than one of the original disciples, “clearly naming him a presbyter” (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.5). Eusebius alleges this to be proof that there were two men named John in Asia—the first, an apostle and author of the Gospel of John; the second, a mere second-generation “elder” and author of the book of Revelation (3.39.6).

⁴ See Alfred Schoene, ed., *Eusebi: Chronicorum Libri Duo*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Wiedemann, 1866), 162.

⁵ Greek text and translation from Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 734–35.

Eusebius’s reading of his own quoted material is strained, apparently intended to drive a wedge between the book of Revelation (along with its millennial theology) and the apostle John. The quote from Papias itself, for which I provided relevant Greek terms above, uses the terms *πρεσβύτερος/οι* consistently for the first-generation disciples, including John. So, pointing out that the second mention of John calls him “the elder” proves nothing; John had already been called one of the “elders” in the previous list, along with Andrew, Peter, Philip, Thomas, James, and Matthew. Papias uses the term “elder” for those of the generation immediately preceding his own, not as an ecclesiastical office per se. Second, Papias calls the “second” John, along with Aristion, “the Lord’s disciples,” which is the same title given to the previous group that included Peter, James, Matthew, and the rest. These points strengthen the likelihood that the second “John” refers to the same person as the first “John.” Finally, Eusebius’s assertion that listing John second after Aristion somehow demotes him from apostle to mere elder does not follow, considering the earlier list of eyewitnesses places Peter after Andrew—a strange arrangement if “rank” or notoriety were in Papias’s mind.

But if Papias is not intending to communicate the existence of a second John distinct from the apostle, then why would he repeat the name “John”? The answer is found in the two different tenses of the verb “to say” used for the two different categories: the aorist *εἶπεν* for the first group (including John) and the present *λέγουσιν* for Aristion and John. Papias, whom Irenaeus identified as a “companion of Polycarp” (*Haer.* 5.33.4), lived at a time when most of the original eyewitnesses of Jesus had died, but the apostle John and the disciple Aristion lived on toward the end of the first century. Therefore, Papias could have heard some things from those who personally rather than relying solely on secondhand testimony of what they had said about Jesus’ teaching. Yet Papias outlived both Aristion and John, so he also relayed information from John’s disciples concerning additional teachings he had not had the privilege of hearing firsthand. This explains the two different tenses of the verb *λέγω* as well as the repetition of the apostle John, who fits both categories: those about whom Papias heard (*εἶπεν*) secondhand and those from whom Papias was personally hearing (*λέγουσιν*) firsthand.⁶

Regarding Papias’s teaching concerning the millennial kingdom, Eusebius relays the following summary:

He says that a thousand-year period will occur after the resurrection of the dead, and that the kingdom of Christ will be set up corporeally on this very earth. I think that he made these suppositions by having received the apostolic accounts incorrectly, by not having understood that they spoke mystically, and in signs. For he seems to have been quite small-

⁶ On an alternate theory see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), who argues that the author of the canonical Johannine writings was, in fact, a firsthand eyewitness and disciple of Jesus but that it was not John the son of Zebedee. While this theory definitely distinguishes the two Johns in Papias’s prologue, it still frustrates Eusebius’s (and others’) attempts at driving a wedge between the Book of Revelation, chiliasm, and the first generation of Jesus’s disciples.

minded, as is evidenced by his texts. Moreover, he shares the blame for the many ecclesiastical men after him who shared his opinion because they claimed the man's antiquity, as, for example, Irenaeus and anyone else who declared the same views. (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.12–13 [Schott])

Eusebius's antichilastic bias shines brightly here, so brightly that it seems to blind him to many problems with his characterization. Eusebius's claim that Papias misunderstood the accounts of the apostles because he failed to apply a mystical hermeneutic demonstrates how eager the historian was to judge the earliest writers by fourth-century dogmatic standards. He also fails to consider that Papias himself sought to preserve oral traditions, expressing less interest in written texts (presumably even the book of Revelation, which Eusebius suggest Papias misinterpreted by applying the wrong spiritual hermeneutic). Papias writes, "I did not consider what came from books to be of as much value as what came from a living and abiding voice" (as quoted in *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.4 [Schott]). Note that Papias does not say he rejected the authority of apostolic writings but that in his specific work, *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*, his goal was to relay oral teachings of those who kept the earliest interpretations and teachings alive in the late first and early second centuries. Thus, Eusebius's claim that Papias misinterpreted apostolic accounts is really a fourth-century amillennial attempt at dismissing the early second-century testimony.⁷

When Daley mentions the early premillennialist Papias of Hierapolis, he notes that he "apparently also had had close contact with the community in which the Johannine writings were produced.... Papias' authority became the basis of Irenaeus' own millennial expectations at the end of the second century."⁸ However, Daley's critical adoption of the "Johannine school" and his rejection of the earliest Christian testimony that Papias was a personal hearer of the apostle John himself frustrates this attempt at driving a wedge between John and Papias. And claiming that chiliasm is merely a Jewish-Christian phenomenon is overstated. Even the historical-critical scholar Adolf von Harnack recognizes this when he writes:

Just as little may we designate Jewish Christian the mighty and realistic hopes of the future which were gradually repressed in the second and third centuries. They may be described as Jewish, or as Christian; but the designation Jewish Christian must be rejected; for it gives a wrong impression as to the historic right of these hopes in Christianity. The eschatological

⁷ The insulting characterization of Papias as "small-minded" gives us insight into Eusebius's deep prejudice toward the ancient view that he saw as too naïve and ignorant. This does not change the fact that the early premillennial perspective—not the later amillennial view—has the privilege of precedence. Perhaps this fact alone drive Eusebius to his disdain for and mischaracterization of Papias. Against Eusebius's eagerness to pin Irenaeus's millennial eschatology on Papias, Grant writes, "Papias was not, however, the only source of Irenaeus' doctrine. The apologist Justin had insisted on the orthodoxy of the doctrine that Jerusalem was to be restored as the capital of the saints' thousand-year kingdom" (Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons, The Early Church Fathers* (London: Routledge, 1997), 39

⁸ Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, 18.

ideas of Papias were not Jewish Christian, but Christian; while, on the other hand, the eschatological speculations of Origen were not Gentile Christian, but essentially Greek.⁹

Another way of countering the traditional view of the widespread and well-developed premillennialism in the earliest church is found in the thesis of Charles Hill, which has had significant influence on the historiography of those who hold to an amillennial eschatology but have had a difficult time with the apparent dominance of premillennialism in the early church.¹⁰ Hill admits that explicit, firsthand sources for amillennialism from the second century are lacking: “Important Christian writers such as, among others, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, and the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* have at times been lined up on either side of the question or have been prudently dismissed as witnesses to either view.”¹¹ This leaves us with the evidential fact that the only direct and explicit firsthand sources for any millennial view in the second century are premillennial.¹²

In the past, this dearth of primary evidence from proponents of amillennialism in the second century has been exploited by premillennialists.¹³ They often argued that the earliest disciples of the apostles were premillennial while amillennialism was a later development and a deviation from the original premillennial perspective passed down from the apostles. This narrative explains the absence of amillennial voices and presence of premillennial voices in the second century.¹⁴

Hill, however, attempts to counter this narrative of the early prevalence of premillennialism by employing an ingenious and commendable approach. While admitting that when second-century fathers expressly address the millennial question they were premillennial, Hill seeks to unlock the door to the amillennial understanding of the heretofore silent witnesses (e.g., Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, etc.). He does this by linking second-century premillennialism to a doctrine of the intermediate state in which the souls of the disembodied saints do not go straight to heaven but to a subterranean realm (Hades) until the resurrection, at which time they will enter the kingdom of

⁹ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 1, 3d ed., trans. Neil Buchanan (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1902), 288.

¹⁰ Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

¹¹ Hill, *Regnum Caelorum*, 6.

¹² These include, unambiguously, Papias of Hierapolis, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, and with some dispute, Didache and Barnabas.

¹³ For example, see H. Wayne House, “Premillennialism in the Ante-Nicene Church,” *BSac* 169.3 (2012): 271–82.

¹⁴ Better-informed and more nuanced treatments have acknowledged the possible existence of indirect testimony of a mid-second-century amillennialism from two premillennial sources, Justin Martyr (*Dial.* 80) and Irenaeus (*Haer.* 5.31.1). In a common reading of these sources, both admit that though their view of an earthly kingdom is superior, other Christians did not hold that view. Though these passages could be read as referring to heretics (see Excursus 8, pp. 2–4), they could also refer to orthodox amillennialists. Thus, the history is often amended to accommodate the secondhand, indirect evidence for amillennialism: though premillennialism was the dominant view among the earliest post-apostolic teachers, amillennialism had enough of a following to draw the gentle criticism from premillennialists like Justin and Irenaeus. Yet these amillennial voices seem to have appeared on the scene only around the mid-second century, rendering premillennialism still the earliest (and thus apostolic) view. If this reading is accurate, the issue of debate revolves around why premillennialism was so dominant and how it eventually fell out of a favor.

Christ on earth. So interconnected are the intermediate state and premillennialism, Hill argues, that when an author alleges that the disembodied saint actually goes to heaven, that author cannot at the same time hold to premillennialism. Then, by demonstrating that Ignatius, Clement, Polycarp, and others did, in fact, teach that departed spirits go to heaven, these writers must be placed on the non-premillennial side of the evidential scale. These, then, are the orthodox Christians identified by Justin and Irenaeus as those holding a different view of the millennium than they.¹⁵ The resulting narrative, then, is not necessarily that the earliest Christians were amillennial instead of premillennial, but that the earliest post-apostolic Christians had a diversity of millennial views held for a number of reasons. It is up to the modern biblical scholar and theologian to determine which early view best reflects the teaching of the Old and New Testaments.

Though Hill's thesis had gone virtually unchallenged for some time, some patristic scholars have recently countered it.¹⁶ In a 2020 article, Craig Blaising concluded that Hill "has failed to demonstrate a logical, necessary connection between chiliasm and a subterranean descent of Christian souls at death.... It is not the case that the two were so conceptually linked that the appearance of one doctrine necessarily implies the other."¹⁷ And in 2023, Paul Hartog also challenged Hill's thesis and pointed out several methodological and evidential inconsistencies:

Hill's interpretive "key" (that chiliasm and a subterranean repose of the righteous dead were integrally linked) cannot function as a golden code to decipher and differentiate all patristic eschatologies. In general, Hill has overly relied upon this over-arching "key," which we have found to treat the phenomena in a reductionistic manner. Some amillennial authors espoused an infernal intermediate state (Augustine), and some premillennial authors believed in a heavenly intermediate state (Hippolytus and Methodius). Texts by some chiliastic authors supported a celestial reward for the martyrs in particular (passages in Tertullian and Irenaeus). For patristic chiliasts, the foundational grounding of their perspective was not an alliance of millennialism with an infernal intermediate repose, but their interpretive approach to Revelation and texts such as Isaiah and Ezekiel.¹⁸

In my own years of reading and researching early patristic eschatology, I have also harbored some concerns over the viability of Hill's thesis, though space does not allow a full deconstruction of the arguments. Nevertheless, a few observations are in order. First, Hill's thesis resorts to

¹⁵ Hill, *Regnum Caelorum*, 6.

¹⁶ See the brief but excellent discussion in Steven D. Aguzzi, *Israel, the Church, and Millenarianism: A Way beyond Replacement Theology*, Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies (New York: Routledge, 2018), 118–21; cf. Juan José Ayán Calvo, "Escatología cósmica y Sagrada Escritura en Ireneo de Lyon," *Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi* 16.1 (1999): 197–98.

¹⁷ Craig A. Blaising, "Early Christian Millennialism and the Intermediate State," *BSac* 177.2 (2020): 232.

¹⁸ Paul A. Hartog, "Patristic Era (AD 100–250)," in *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Cory M. Marsh and James I. Fazio (El Cajon, CA: SCS Press, 2023), 82. See the full chapter for details of Hartog's argument against Hill's thesis.

question-begging when confronted with evidence from early premillennialists, such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, that they seemed to have held to both a millennial kingdom and a heavenly intermediate state.¹⁹ Second, Hill's thesis does not adequately account for the evidence of *Didache* and *Barnabas*, which we will examine shortly.²⁰ Third, it raises important questions regarding later amillennial perspectives, especially of Roman Catholicism, in which a purgatorial existence is held alongside an amillennial eschatology; and later premillennial perspectives, especially contemporary premillennialism, in which an immediate admission to heaven is coupled with a premillennial eschatology. If later eschatological positions rendered irrelevant the indispensable second-century link between the intermediate state and premillennialism, is the link really as indispensable as it first appears?

Steven Aguzzi's estimation of Hill's thesis sums up the situation well:

Hill's argument, which rests on the assumption that those who did not believe in an intermediate state within the first few centuries C.E. were amillennialists, and those who did were chiliasts, has been shown to be untenable. Likewise, some chiliasts believed that souls went directly to heaven—a belief that Hill claims drew a stark contrast between millennial and amillennial thought in the first several centuries of the Church. Evidence from the first two centuries, by contrast, suggests that no Christians from that period held to what would now be discerned as amillennialism.... Overall, in spite of Hill's detailed research and fine contribution to the debate, his interpretive framework fails to show that amillennialism was an eschatological view that rivaled chiliasm in the early Church.²¹

¹⁹ See Brian C. Collins, "Were the Fathers Amillennial? An Evaluation of Charles Hill's *Regnum Caelorum*," *BSac* 177.2 (2020): 207–20; Hartog, "Patristic Era," 58–59.

²⁰ Hill relies heavily on the supposed "restored ending" of *Didache* reconstructed by Robert Aldridge (Robert E. Aldridge, "The Lost Ending of the *Didache*," *VigChr* 53 (1999): 1–15) and based on material from *Apostolic Constitutions* (Hill, *Regnum Caelorum*, 77–78). This will be challenged as methodologically irresponsible in the treatment of *Didache* 16 in Go Deeper Excursus 6. Hill also relies upon a modern trend that reverses the traditional reading of *Barn.* 15 as chiliastic, suggesting that "the *Epistle of Ps.-Barnabas*...is probably not chiliastic, though it is a receptacle for a certain tradition, the world-week scheme, which became important for some chiliasts, and it did apparently use Jewish apocalypses that can be called chiliastic" (Hill, *Regnum Caelorum*, 77). With these two hasty dismissals of first-century testimonies, Hill attempts to dislodge premillennial eschatology from its earliest patristic footing.

²¹ Aguzzi, *Israel, the Church, and Millenarianism*, 120.