



The Millennium ~ Literal or Figurative?

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The Early Church and Beyond ~ Views on the Millennium

About the Author and the Ministry

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TA Ministries is a non-denominational and non-profit faith ministry founded in 1989 when the book '*To Catholics Whom I Love*' was written by Terry Arnold. This book went through several re-prints and served as a fruitful outreach to Roman Catholics.

In 1996 the ministry became a full-time operation with the introduction of a free newsletter, later named '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

Diakrisis is published bi-monthly to *teach, inform* and *equip* the church of Biblical truths and to warn of false teaching. It has also been a valuable reference aid to hundreds of pastors/elders.

toward the north, and half of it toward the south... And it shall be in that day, that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem; half of them toward the former sea, and half of them toward the hinder sea: in summer and in winter shall it be. And the Lord shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one Lord, and his name one... there shall be no more utter destruction; but Jerusalem shall be safely inhabited... ' (Zech.14:1-11).

Terry Arnold

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The Millennium - Literal or Figurative?

Is the Millennium ('one thousand years') mentioned in the book of Revelation to be taken Literally?

In the OT the mention of 'a thousand' in many instances is usually accepted across the board as literal - (e.g. Nu.1:41 - tribes of Israel...(also in 2:16,28; 31:34; Ezra 2:69 (thousands of pounds of silver and gold); Is.30:17; etc...). Some would say that these are obviously literal. But is the 1,000 years in the book of Revelation likewise obviously *not* literal? Or is it obviously figurative?

The concept of 1,000 years is mentioned six times in Revelation (Rev.20:2-7 '*...Satan, and bound him a thousand years...*' 3 '*...till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season*'. 4 '*...souls of them that were beheaded... reigned with Christ a thousand years*'. 5 '*...the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection*'. 6 '*...reign with him a thousand years*' 7 '*And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed...*').

Should we 'allegorise' this 1,000 years? One key to answering this is to look at how the same wording is used elsewhere in the same book: Revelation 11:3 '*...two witnesses... prophesy a thousand two hundred and threescore days...*' (3.5 years) 12:6 '*And the woman fled into the wilderness... a thousand two hundred and threescore days*'. 14:20 '*...space of a thousand and six hundred furlongs*'.

Is there any reason or hermeneutics that would necessitate these being symbolic or figurative?

If one looks at numbers elsewhere in the New Testament such as the 'loaves and the fishes' - these numbers are usually taken literally. For example, '*two thousand swine*' (Mk.5:13) - we normally take this literally; and the numbers of souls saved in Acts - all are taken literally.

So why is it that we invent a hermeneutical rule when it comes to prophecy or Revelation which says it has to be 'figurative'?

If 1,000 years is not literal then why did John have so much detail for this: Revelation 20:3-7 '*And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations*

Conclusion

It is widely accepted that the early Church Fathers were mostly Pre-millennial in their view of eschatology and accepted the Millennium as being literal. However, the Bible is the *sole basis* from which a believer in Christ should learn what is true. But again, the intent of this article is to refute what is sometimes heard today from unscholarly sources - that the early church was 'A-millennial and that they did not take a Millennium literally. This article is to show that the early church clearly believed the Millennium to be literal and indeed had a literal interpretation of scripture in general before allegorical and other methods encroached at the end of the 2nd century and beyond.

The Bible should mean what it says. The Old Testament prophecies are in perfect harmony with a literal Millennial reign of Christ. His return will be like his ascension - literal. Zechariah chapters 12 and 14 attests to this in a most literal way. It is well near impossible to wrest this chapter away from a literal view:

'The burden of the word of the Lord for Israel, says the Lord... I will make Jerusalem a cup of trembling unto all the people round about, when they shall be in the siege both against Judah and against Jerusalem. And in that day will I make Jerusalem a burdensome stone for all people... the people of the earth be gathered together against it... In that day shall the Lord defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem... And it shall come to pass in that day, that I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced...' (Zech.12:1-10).

'Behold, the day of the Lord comes... I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle... Then shall the Lord go forth, and fight against those nations... his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove

‘We know that Christ was really, personally, and physically here on earth. But it is not quite so clear to some persons that he is to come, really, personally, and literally the second time... Now, we believe that the Christ who shall sit on the throne of his father David, and whose feet shall stand upon Mount Olivet, is as much a personal Christ as the Christ who came to Bethlehem and wept in the manger’ (*‘The Two Advents of Christ’* in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (MTP) 8:39).

‘Some think that this descent of the Lord will be post-Millennial; that is, after the thousand years of his reign. I cannot think so. I conceive that the advent will be pre-Millennial; that he will come first; and then will come the millennium as the result of his personal reign upon earth’ (*‘Justification and Glory’*, MTP 11:249)

‘There is, moreover, to be a reign of Christ. I cannot read the Scriptures without perceiving that there is to be a Millennial reign, as I believe, upon the earth, and that there shall be new heavens and new earth wherein dwell righteousness’ (*‘For Ever with the Lord’* in MTP 23:522).

‘There will be a native government again; there will again be the form of a body politic; a state shall be incorporated, and a king shall reign. Israel has now become alienated from her own land... If there be anything clear and plain, the literal sense and meaning of this passage [Ezekiel 37:1-10] a meaning not to be spirited or spiritualised away; must be evident that both the two and the ten tribes of Israel are to be restored to their own land, and that a king is to rule over them’ (*‘The Restoration and Conversion of the Jews’*, MTP 10:426).

‘The people of Israel are to be converted to God, and... their conversion is to be permanent... This thing shall be, and... both in the spiritual and in the temporal throne, the King Messiah shall sit, and reign among his people gloriously’ (*‘The Restoration and the conversion of the Jews’*, MTP, 582)

no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season. 4 And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshiped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. 5 But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is he that has part in the first resurrection: on such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years. 7 And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection... 10 And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night forever and ever.’

Do we believe that this ‘lake of fire’ and the ‘torment’ in the same passage are literal or figurative? The text says that Satan will be tormented ‘*For ever and Ever*’ - do we take that literally? Most do. Why is it we take ‘*for ever and ever*’ literally and not ‘one thousand years’ when it is mentioned six times in one passage and in the same book?

The problem with picking and choosing what is literal and not literal is that *inconsistencies* begin to occur.

Most of the early church fathers in the first two centuries took this passage concerning the millennium literally. The passage is arguably not obviously figurative unless one adds a hermeneutical rule that says ‘prophecy’ is figurative in such a passage. But the rule should arguably be: the language is literal and means what it says *unless it is obviously figurative*.

Are there times when we would *not* take the word ‘thousand’ literally? Yes, and for good reason. There are times when the text is *obviously* figurative language. For example: 1Corinthians 4:15 ‘*For though you have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have you not many fathers...*’. 1Corinthians 14:19 ‘*Yet in the church I had rather*

...speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue'.

Is this literally 'ten thousand'? Apart from the *obvious hyperbolic language* and *context*, there is *also* a vital clue here in the original language. The 'ten thousand' here is the Greek word 'muriōs' - an indefinite number and an 'idiom' (a word unique to the culture or people and used in a certain way). The use of the hyperbole is also used (an extreme exaggeration used to make a point). We get the word 'myriad' from this Greek word.

But note the Greek word 'muriōs' is different to that in Revelation - 'chilio'. This is important. Had the writer meant the Revelation passage to be figurative, why did he not use such an indefinite word as 'muriōs' which would have fitted a figurative interpretation? Also the *context* in 1Corinthians shows it is certainly not literal. (This passage can also be compared with 1Corinthians 13:1-3 which also is obviously not literal and further proved by the use of hyperbole).

One fourth of the Bible is prophetic. Much of it looks towards the end. The prophecies in the Old Testament that show that Messiah will reign on the earth directly correlate with the prophecy in Revelation chapter 20 that Jesus the Messiah will reign on the earth for a thousand years. Isaiah 9:6-7 speaks of the Messiah reigning on David's throne, which is on earth. Zechariah 14:1-21 speaks of the Messiah ruling over the whole earth from Jerusalem. Correspondingly, Revelation 20:4-6 speaks of Christ reigning on the earth for a thousand years.

If Revelation 20:4-6 is not literal then God's promises concerning the land of Israel also have to be reinterpreted. God's promises to Israel contain much *detail* in the Old Testament. God promised Israel that she would inhabit the land promised them and would be a great nation (Mic.2:12-13; Jer.23:5-6; Is.61:1-62; 65: 17-24). Israel never received the full land of Canaan and never received the prominence as a nation promised. God promised Israel she would be the centre of worship of the Lord (Zech.14: 6-21). God promised Israel that the Lord would reign with righteousness and justice from Jerusalem (Is.2:1-4).

...future glorious times of the church both Judah and Ephraim, or Judah and the ten tribes, shall be brought in together, and shall be united as one people as they formerly were under David and Solomon (Hos.1:1), and so in the last chapter of Hosea, and other parts of the prophecy' (P.469-70)

Charles Spurgeon

Charles Spurgeon was one of the late 'Puritans' who was one of the great church leaders and evangelists of his time. Spurgeon was not emphatic about eschatology and did not preach on it much. However, his literal view of the Millennium is consistent and clear in many sermons. In his treatment of the Psalms he often referred to the 'Millennial Psalms' and God literally reigning on earth.

Spurgeon did not clearly delineate the kind of Pre-mill position he held. He did also appear to apply Israel to the church in dealing with some Psalms. But sadly some prominent A-millennial and Post-millennial authors have been guilty of editing some of his quotes in an attempt to show Spurgeon as not quite the Pre-millennial literalist that he was. But this is futile when even some of his many quotes are read in full. Some passages are quite anti the A-millennial view, a view which was not uncommon in his day. A-Millennialists reject the common Pre-millennial teaching that the resurrection of believers and that of unbelievers will be separated by a thousand years. Spurgeon was well aware of this and other views. His belief shown in his '*Things To Come*' was that Christians are to '*expect a reigning Christ on earth*' - quite the opposite of a-millennialists, who see Christ's reign as spiritual and/or heavenly. In fact, Spurgeon warned in the same sermon that the earthly reign of Christ is '*put so literally that we dare not spiritualise it*'. ('*Things To Come*' 15:329).

The following are a small sample of the many quotes by Spurgeon on a literal Millennium and a Premillennial view:

'It is certain also that our Lord Jesus Christ will come again to this earth, and that he will reign amongst his ancients gloriously, and that there will be a thousand years of joy and peace such as were never known on this earth before'. (Sermon '*The Harvest and the Vintage*')

From his *'A History of the Work of Redemption'*, Edwards concluded that as the Millennium is inaugurated, following the overthrow of the Mohammedan kingdom, and there will be a gradual conversion of the Jewish Diaspora:

'Jewish infidelity shall then be overthrown. However obstinate they have now been for above seventeen hundred years in their rejecting Christ, and instances of conversion of any of that nation have been so very rare ever since the destruction of Jerusalem, but they have against the plain teachings of their own prophets continued to approve of the cruelty of their forefathers in crucifying [Christ]; yet when this day comes the thick veil that blinds their eyes shall be removed (II Cor. 3:16), and divine grace shall melt and renew their hard hearts, And they shall look upon him whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn (Zech. 12:10 etc.). And then shall all Israel be saved [Rom.11:26]. The Jews in all their dispersions shall cast away their old infidelity, and shall wonderfully have their hearts changed, and abhor themselves for their past unbelief and obstinacy; and shall flow together to the blessed Jesus, penitently, humbly, and joyfully owning him as their glorious king and only saviour, and shall with all their hearts as with one heart and voice declare his praises unto other nations [Isa 66:20; Jer 50:4]'. (P.469)

'Nothing is more certainly foretold than this national conversion of the Jews in the eleventh chapter of Romans. And there are also many passages of the Old Testament that can't be interpreted any other sense, that I can't now stand to mention. Besides the prophecies of the calling of the Jews, we have a remarkable seal of the fulfilment of this great event in providence by a thing that is a kind of continual miracle, viz. the preserving them a distinct [nation] when in such a dispersed condition for above sixteen hundred years. The world affords nothing else like it - a remarkable hand of providence. When they shall be called, then shall the ancient people that were alone God's people for so long a time be called God's people again, never to be rejected more, one fold with the Gentiles; and then shall also the remains of the ten tribes wherever they are, and though they have been rejected much longer than [the Jews], be brought in with their brethren, the Jews. The prophecies of Hosea especially seem to hold this forth, and that in the

Did God make the scriptures so hard to understand? Why does he say 1,000 years in Revelation and not mean that? *It's the interpretation (hermeneutics) that is the issue.*

Is Genesis to be taken literally? If so, why do we take the *days* literally in the first book and not the *years* in the last book?

The early church fathers in the first two centuries (such as Justin Martyr, Papias, Tertullian, Victorinus and more) saw the Millennium in Revelation as being literal. They were often called 'chilliasts' - from the Greek word for 'thousand'). They believed the 1,000 years was literal. It was only in the 3rd century that more allegoric hermeneutics entered into the writings of the church fathers. The commentaries at this point become more and more fanciful with some bordering on the ridiculous, as accepted by many commentators.

There were also Puritans and others throughout history that maintained the literal view. Charles Spurgeon apparently saw the 'Millennium' as yet to come... In 1865 he stated: *'The day will come, when the Lord Jesus will descend from heaven with a shout, with the trump of the archangel and the voice of God. Some think that this descent of the Lord will be post-Millennial - that is, after the thousand years of His reign. I cannot think so. I conceive that the advent will be pre-Millennial; that He will come first; and then will come the Millennium as the result of His personal reign upon earth.'* (Justification & Glory MTP Vol.11, 1865, P.249, Romans 8:30).

Other prophetic passages that are taken figuratively by some are Zechariah chapter 12 and 14. 'Spiritualising' those passages occurs in the same way the Millennium is spiritualised. Yet the passages give much specific detail about the coming of the Lord and the geography, which simply has not been fulfilled. It is interesting that those who do not take Zechariah chapter 14 as literal will however take the ascension of Jesus as being literal. But why one and not the other? Again, inconsistencies occur when a literal interpretation is not first recognised.

Charles Spurgeon stated: *'We are to expect the literal advent of Jesus Christ, for He Himself by his angel told us, 'This same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven shall so come in like manner as ye*

have seen him go into heaven' which must mean literally and in person. We expect a reigning Christ on earth; that seems to us to be very plain, and to be put so literally that we dare not spiritualise it. We anticipate a first and a second resurrection; a first resurrection of the righteous, and a second resurrection of the ungodly, who shall be judged, condemned, and punished forever by the sentence of the great King'. ('Things to Come' MTP Vol.15, 1869, P.329, 1 Cor.3:22).

On a future Israel, Spurgeon stated: *'I will make a covenant of peace with them', and Jesus is our peace, therefore we gather that Jehovah shall enter into the covenant of grace with them, that covenant of which Christ is the federal head, the substance, and the surety. They are to walk in God's ordinances and statutes, and so exhibit the practical effects of being united to Christ who hath given them peace. All these promises certainly imply that the people of Israel are to be converted to God, and that this conversion is to be permanent, for the tabernacle of God is to be with them, the Most High is, in an especial manner, to have his sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore; so that whatever nations may apostatise and turn from the Lord in these latter days, the nation of Israel never can, for she shall be effectually and permanently converted, the hearts of the fathers shall be turned with the hearts of the children unto the Lord their God, and they shall be the people of God, world without end' ('The Restoration & Conversion of the Jews' MTP Vol.10, 1864, P.427-430, Ezek.37:1-10)*

'Come then, Christian, contemplate for a moment thy beloved Lord. Jesus, in a Millennial age, shall be the light and the glory of the city of the new Jerusalem' ('The Lamb - the Light' MTP Vol.10, 1864, P.439, Rev.21:23). Many more quotes can be shown by Spurgeon and other Puritans before him who taught clearly a future Israel and a literal Millennium (see our article on page 12 'The Early Church and Beyond - Views on the Millennium').

I do not believe we should be dogmatic about such doctrines as the Millennium (as Spurgeon also stated in his sermons). However, we should be *consistent in applying rules of hermeneutics*. When I was a Roman Catholic teacher we had similar interpretive rules as many 'A-Millennium' advocates have. But when I was saved I was clearly led to start reading the Bible *literally unless it was obviously*

Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards was one of the greatest Puritans, revivalists and Bible teachers of all time. He believed in a definite future conversion of the Jews and a literal return by them to their ancient land in Palestine renamed Canaan. It is clear from his biographies that He saw the Old Testament prophecies relating to this as being literal.

Stephen J. Stein, editor of Volume 5 of Edwards' *'Apocalyptic Writings'* writes of Edwards: *'The Millennium remained a matter of consuming private interest for him... During the Millennium kings will be like the judges who ruled ancient Israel before the monarchy was established... a form of government that pleased God greatly... The geography of the Millennium, another issue that divided commentators, attracted his exegetical attention. Edwards found scriptural warrant for placing the land of Canaan at the centre of the coming kingdom of Christ... In like manner, he speculated that the return of the Jews to their homeland is inevitable because of the promises of land made to them have only partially been fulfilled. God intends the Jews to be a visible monument of his grace and power. The return to their traditional homeland, however, was premised by Edwards upon a conversion of the Jews to Christianity...[Then] Canaan will be the spiritual center of the coming kingdom, and Israel will again be a truly distinct nation'.*

In his *'Apocalyptic Writings'*, Edwards makes statements concerning the strategic and important eschatological location of Israel: *'The land of Canaan is the most advantageously posited of any spot of ground on the face [of the earth], to be the place from whence the truth should shine forth, and true religion spread around into all parts of the world...'*

'And it is the more evident, the Jews will return to their own land again, because they never yet possessed one quarter of the land, which was so often promised them, from the Red Sea to the river Euphrates (Exod. 23:31; Gen. 15:18, Deut. 11:24; Josh. 1:4). Indeed, it was partly fulfilled in Solomon's time, when he governed all within those bounds for a short time; but so short, that it is not thought that this is all the fulfilment of the promise that is to be. And besides, that was not a fulfilment of the promise, because they did not possess it, though they made the nations of its tributary' (Vol.5, P.134- 35)

towards the end of the third century, then Lactantius, and Victorinus of Petau, at the beginning of the fourth century, and finally Methodius (a martyr in 311) and Apollinaris of Laodicea in Syria.

Other writers

Although this literal view of a Millennium was decreasing by the 3rd century, there are also many of the later Divines and Puritans who held to a literal view.

During the middle ages there are few examples of a literal Millennial view being put forward. This could well be part due to the darkness of the Roman Catholic system and the oppression which would have been evident to anyone having a differing view to that religion which was mostly of an A-Millennial view. However, many Protestant groups such as the Albigenses, Lombards and the Waldenses were attracted to a literal interpretation of the Bible. Their writings were often destroyed by the Roman church system. Many other authors and Divines could also be quoted as having a literal view of the Millennium and end time events.

Peter Jurieu in his book, *'Approaching Deliverance of the Church'* (1687) taught that Christ would come in the air to rapture the saints and return to Heaven before the battle of Armageddon. Philip Doddridge's commentary on the New Testament (1738) and John Gill's commentary on the New Testament (1748) both use the term 'rapture' and speak of it as imminent. James Macknight (1763) and Thomas Scott (1792) taught that the righteous will be carried to heaven, where they will be secure until the time of judgment is over.

Morgan Edwards (1742-1744) the Founder of Brown University was a prominent Baptist Leader in his day. Edwards taught that Christ would return for his church saints 3.5 years before he returned to establish the Kingdom of Christ on earth, the 1,000 year reign of Christ. He stated: *'The distance between the first and second resurrection will be somewhat more than a thousand years. I say, somewhat more, because the dead saints will be raised, and the living changed at Christ's 'appearing in the air' (1 Thess.4:17); and this will be about three years and a half before the Millennium, as we shall see hereafter: but will he and they abide in the air all that time? No: they will ascend to paradise, or to some one of those many 'mansions in the Father's house' (John 14:2)'*

figurative. I admit there are some passages I might not be sure on though, as I have not actually sat down and looked at the rules applied to every text. However, when a passage is to be taken figuratively the context is often *obviously* so.

Below are some examples of arguments put to this author for not being able to take scripture literally:

'The cattle on a thousand hills' (Psalm 50:10).

This is a poor example when the text is *obviously a figurative expression*. The saying 'a thousand hills' was also a Hebrew expression for *many hills*. We still use it today even in English. The *context* also is clear in that obviously God owns cattle on a lot more than 1,000 hills. I know of no one who would say that Psalm 50:10 is 'literal'. Thus it becomes a strawman argument.

'One day is with the Lord as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day' (2Peter 3:8).

Again, the two phrases are put in contrast with *'is as'* - it is saying that God does not keep time as we do; even a thousand years. That is the main point, not the definitive time period. Again, no one I know would take this to be literally a day, or a thousand, but rather that it is referring to God being *'longsuffering'*. The point and context here is not concerning the years or day but that *God is longsuffering!*

'Last days': *'We cannot take 'last days' literally... we now live 2,000+ years later' than when this expression was used in scripture?'*

This understanding depends on what we might be reading into what the *'last days'* means. What does it refer to in context where it is used? Hebrews 1:1,2 tells us that it is a time period of the *revelation of Jesus Christ*. The Jews understood that as the time of the Messiah and beyond. No length of time is given for these 'last days'. We are simply 2,000+ years advanced into the 'last days'. Some call it the Gospel age, others the 'church age'. But it has extended now for approximately 2,000 years. No time is given exactly for the word *'last'* as being a set number of days. The context simply delineates a time after the prophets spoke and then now the 'last days' of the revelation of Jesus Christ: *'God who at sundry times and in divers manners spoke*

in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Has in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds' (Heb.1:1,2).

'The 'seven lampstands' are only symbols as are the seven stars. They cannot be taken literally'

The seven 'golden candlesticks' are mentioned in Revelation chapter 1. But we are in fact told what they mean! Vs.20 tells us what this 'mystery' is: *'The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which you saw are the seven churches'*.

The 'candlesticks' are figures, but then *we are told* that they are literally 'seven churches'.

Is there any reason or hermeneutics that would necessitate the 1,000 years in Revelation to be figurative?

Is Genesis to be taken literally? Why do many take the *days* literally in the first book and not the *years* in the last book? The problem with picking and choosing what is literal and not literal is that inconsistencies begin to occur. I am content to be with the earliest of church Fathers and the earliest of interpretations on this issue.

The 'ten thousand' phrase in Revelation is not the '*murios*' used elsewhere for a figurative expression denoting an indefinite number, but the '*chilio*' used many times throughout the Gospels and epistles denoting a *definite number*. Had the writer meant the Revelation passage to be figurative, why did he not use such a word as '*murios*'?

The early church fathers in the first two centuries saw the Millennium in Revelation as literal. Only a much smaller number of them rejected a literal kingdom (Clement of Alexandria, Caius, Origen and Dionysius). It was only in the 3rd century that allegoric hermeneutics entered into the writings of the church fathers.

The simplest, consistent and most rational rule should be: the language is literal and means what it says *unless it is obviously figurative*.

Terry Arnold

Tertullian (145-220)

Of this church Father, Tertullian (145-220), historian Schaff writes: *'Tertullian was an enthusiastic Chiliast, and pointed not only to the Apocalypse, but also to the predictions of the Montanist prophets... After Tertullian, and independently of Montanism, chiliasm was taught by Commodian towards the close of the third century, Lactantius, and Victorinus of Petau, at the beginning of the fourth. Its last distinguished advocates in the East were Methodius (d., a martyr, 311), the opponent of Origen... 1177 and Apollinaris of Laodicea in Syria'*. (1)

Tertullian wrote: *'But we do confess that a kingdom is promised to us upon the earth, although before heaven, only in another state of existence; in as much as it will be after the resurrection for a thousand years in the divinely-built city of Jerusalem, 'let down from heaven,' which the apostle also calls 'our mother from above;' and, while declaring that our citizenship is in heaven, he predicts of it that it is really a city in heaven. This both Ezekiel had knowledge of and the Apostle John beheld'*. (2)

Cyprian (200 AD – 258 AD)

In his Treatises Cyprian wrote, describing the end times Great Tribulation:

'We who see that terrible things have begun, and know that still more terrible things are imminent, may regard it as the greatest advantage to depart from it as quickly as possible. Do you not give God thanks, do you not congratulate yourself, that by an early departure you are taken away, and delivered from the shipwrecks and disasters that are imminent? Let us greet the day which assigns each of us to his own home, which snatches us hence, and sets us free from the snares of the world and restores us to paradise and the kingdom'.

Many more examples could be given for the early church Fathers and their literal pre-Millennial and literal view of the millennium. Others, such as Ephraim the Syrian (306-373) can also be cited for clear views of a rapture and tribulation. 'Chiliasm' was taught by Commodian

(1) '*The Christian Church from the 1st to the 20th Century*' By Philip Schaff

(2) Tertullian, Against Marcion, book 3 ch.25.

‘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’. (1)

On the subject of other literal events such as the Rapture and Tribulation:

‘And therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, ‘There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be’... But, knowing the sure number declared by Scripture, that is, six hundred sixty and six, let them await, in the first place, the division of the kingdom into ten; then, in the next place, when these kings are reigning... and (Antichrist) shall terrify those men of whom we have been speaking, having a name containing the aforesaid number, is truly the abomination of desolation. This, too, the apostle affirms: “When they shall say, Peace and safety, then sudden destruction shall come upon them. when he (Antichrist) is come, and of his own accord concentrates in his own person the apostasy... sitting also in the temple of God, so that his dupes may adore him as the Christ’. (2)

‘Those nations however, who did not of themselves raise up their eyes unto heaven, nor returned thanks to their Maker, nor wished to behold the light of truth, but who were like blind mice concealed in the depths of ignorance, the word justly reckons ‘as waste water from a sink, and as the turning weight of a balance - in fact, as nothing so far useful and serviceable to the just, as stubble conduces towards the growth of the wheat, and its straw, by means of combustion, serves for working gold. And therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, “There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be. For this is the last contest of the righteous, in which, when they overcome they are crowned with incorruption.’ (3)

(1) Irenaeus, Against Heresies, book 5 ch.30, para.4.

(2) Book 5, ch.29, para.1.

(3) ‘Against Heresies’ 5.29

The Early Church and Beyond - Views on the Millennium

Is the Millennium ('one thousand years') mentioned in the book of Revelation to be taken Literally? This is the second article in a series that addresses this issue (the first: '*The Millennium - Literal or Figurative?*').

The information below addresses the historical aspect of the Millennium views.

Today there are three basic positions regarding the Millennium, whether it is a literal thousand years or symbolic, and whether Jesus will reign literally on earth or spiritually elsewhere.

The 'Pre-millennial' position states Jesus will return and reign on the earth for a literal thousand-year period (Millennium).

The 'Post-millennial' position states that Jesus will return after a thousand years. When this begins and ends no one knows and during the thousand years righteousness will increase with the gospel influence of the church on earth. Then Christ will return. The promises to Israel are fulfilled in the new Israel - the church.

The 'A-millennial' position says there is no literal thousand-year Millennium. It is symbolic of the present age where Christ is ruling in the hearts of Christians and in Heaven. The promises in the OT to Israel are fulfilled in the new Israel, the church.

Early Church Fathers

It is widely accepted by scholars and historians that the early Church Fathers were mostly Pre-millennial in their view of eschatology and they accepted the Millennium as being literal. Even those of other views than Pre-millennial, accept this. Philip Schaff, the dean of American church historians and himself a post-millennialist, provided the following summary of the early church's view of the Millennium: '*The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age is the prominent chiliasm, or Millenarianism, that is the belief in a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment. It was indeed not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion, but a widely current opinion of distinguished*

Modern church historian, Schaff, in his '*Christian Church from the 1st to 20th Century*' writes: '*Justin Martyr (100-165AD) represents the transition from the Jewish Christian to the Gentile Christian chiliasm. He speaks repeatedly of the second parousia of Christ in the clouds of heaven, surrounded by the holy angels. It will be preceded by the near manifestation of the man of sin who speaks blasphemies against the most high God, and will rule three and a half years. He is preceded by heresies and false prophets. After the Millennium the world will be annihilated, or transformed. In his two Apologies, Justin teaches the usual view of the general resurrection and judgment, and makes no mention of the Millennium, but does not exclude it*'

The phrase above that Justin Martyr '*makes no mention of the millennium, but does not exclude it*' appears to downplay the fact that Justin Martyr actually considered pre-millennialism and a literal 1,000 years as orthodoxy in his day and what the apostles believed. But this further quote from Justin shows otherwise: '*And further, there was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied, by a revelation that was made to him, that those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem; and that thereafter the general, and, in short, the eternal resurrection and judgment of all men would likewise take place*'. (1)

Irenaeus (130 A.D - 202 AD)

Irenaeus wrote: '*John, therefore, did distinctly foresee the first 'resurrection of the just', and the inheritance in the kingdom of the earth' he says, 'and what the prophets have prophesied concerning it harmonise [with his vision]'* (2)

In his writings on Bible prophecy, he also acknowledged the phrase '*a time, times and dividing of times*' in Daniel 7 to signify the 3.5 year reign of the Antichrist as ruler of the world before the Second Coming of Christ. He also believed in a literal Millennial reign of Christ on earth following the Second Coming and the resurrection of the just.

(1) Justin Martyr, Dialogue, ch.81.

(2) Irenaeus, Against Heresies, book 5, ch.36, para.3.

The importance of Both Polycarp and Papias being early students of the apostle John are worth noting. Polycarp (A.D. 70-155), bishop of Smyrna, is also said to have been a pre-millennialist. (1) The Epistle of Barnabas (written between AD 120-150) also presents the common belief that *'in six thousand years, all things will be finished... then shall He truly rest on the seventh day'*. The epistle clearly implies that Christ will set up a kingdom on earth followed by an eternal state. (2)

The Shepherd of Hermas (95-150)

The Shepherd of Hermas is disputed as to his Millennialism, as some say the quotes are vague. This church Father wrote an account in his 'fourth vision' (in similar fashion to 'Pilgrims' progress') - the following which shows arguably some understanding of literal end time events:

'You have escaped from the great tribulation on account of your faith, and because you did not doubt in the presence of such a beast. Go, therefore, and tell the elect of the Lord His mighty deeds, and say to them that this beast is a type of the great tribulation that is coming. If then ye prepare yourselves, and repent with all your heart, and turn to the Lord, it will be possible for you to escape it, if your heart be pure and spotless, and ye spend the rest of the days of your life serving the Lord blamelessly'. (3)

Justin Martyr (100-165)

Justin Martyr (AD 100-165) in his Dialogue With Trypho AD 140, stated: *'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'*. (4)

(1) Irenaeus Against Heresies book 5, ch.22, para. 3-4.

(2) The Epistle of Barrettes, ch.15.

(3) *Vision Fourth. Concerning the Trial and Tribulation that are to Come Upon Men.*

(4) Justin Martyr Dialogue With Trypho, ch.80

teachers, such as Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Methodius, and Lactantius'. (1)

Adolph Harnack, church historian, agrees with Schaff: *'First in point of time came the faith in the nearness of Christ's second advent and the establishing of His reign of glory on the earth. Indeed it appears so early that it might be questioned whether it ought not to be regarded as an essential part of the Christian religion'*. (2)

Others are equally sure of this: *'Accordingly, they were nearly all Pre-millennialists. In fact, Justin Martyr (110-165 AD) went so far as to suggest that anyone with a different viewpoint was heretical'* (Dr. David R. Reagan *'The Early Church Fathers'*, P.4)

However, the Bible is the sole basis from which a believer in Christ should base doctrine. But the intent of this article is to refute what is sometimes heard today from unscholarly sources - that the early church was 'A-millennial and that they did not take the Millennium as being literal. This article is to show that the early church clearly believed the Millennium to be taken literally and indeed had a literal interpretation of scripture in general before allegorical and other methods encroached at the end of the 2nd century and beyond.

Below is a partial list of some of the more well known early theologians who embraced the doctrine of a literal Millennium ('chiliasm') and a future reign of Christ on earth.

Papias (60-130)

Clement of Rome (90-100)

The Shepherd of Hermas (96-150)

Ignatius of Antioch (98-117)

Barnabas (100)

The Didache (100-160)

Justin Martyr (110-165)

(1) Philip Schaff, *'History of the Christian Church'*, VIII (Grand Rapids. Eerdmans Publishing, 1973); vol.II, P.614

(2) Adolph Hamack, *'Millennium'*, The Encyclopedia Britannica, 9th edition (New York Charles Scribner's Sons. 1883), Vol. XVI, P.314

The Epistle of Barnabas (117-138)

Irenaeus (120-202)

Tertullian (145-220)

Hippolytus (185-236)

Cyprian (200-250)

Lactantius (260-330)

Only a small number of the early church fathers rejected a literal kingdom: Clement of Alexandria, Caius, Origen and Dionysius.

The history above arguably matches what this author believes sound hermeneutics to be: The simplest, consistent and most rational rule should be: the language is literal and means what it says *unless it is obviously figurative*.

Here are some samples of a large selection of quotes concerning the above Fathers who taught a literal Millennium or Pre-millennial ideas:

Papias:

Papias is quoted as stating ‘*that 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*’. (1)

Another author describes Papias: ‘*Papias of Hierapolis... Alongside Polycarp, Papias was a student of the apostle John. He was the bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia and was martyred in 163 AD (around the same time that Polycarp was martyred). In addition to enjoying friendship with the apostle John, Papias intimately knew several others who had been alive to interact with Jesus and the apostles... This makes Papias among the most important Christian figures following the completion of the Bible (ca. 96 A.D.). It is unfortunate that outside of a few relics, what survives of Papias’ teachings can only be found where he is quoted or paraphrased by other fathers.*

(1) Papias as quoted in Eusebius Ecclesiastical History, II Vol., (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1926) Vol.1. P.297

The early fourth century Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea confirmed Papias’ Chiliasm or Pre-millennialism: ‘The same person, moreover, has set down other things as coming to him from unwritten tradition, amongst these some strange parables and instructions of the Saviour, and some other things of a more fabulous nature. Amongst these he says that there will be a millennium after the resurrection from the dead, when the personal reign of Christ will be established on this earth’. (1)

Papias expected that Jesus’ earthly reign during the Millennium was to commence after the resurrection of the dead. It is of special interest that Eusebius records that Papias received this belief from an unwritten tradition. Papias’ connection with those who knew Jesus personally indicates that he likely heard of this teaching from one or some of these individuals. It is quite possible that the apostle John himself instructed Papias on the Millennium. This makes the most sense given that John was the writer of Revelation, the book that most clearly teaches on the thousand year reign of Christ.

After writing on the blessings to be found in the Millennium, Irenaeus provides this fascinating quote from Papias:

‘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’. (2)

According to Papias, Judas not only doubted the millennial blessings but even questioned Jesus on how such wonders could ever come to pass. In evoking the villain Judas, Papias and Irenaeus underscored just how important they thought it was to disagree with him’. (3)

(1) Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and Arthur Cleveland Coxe, eds., the Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume I – the Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, 151,154. Eusebius, Fragments of Papias, VI.

(2) Ibid., 563. *Irenaeus, Against Heresies*, bk. V, ch.XXXIII.

(3) Dec.5, 2014 Matthew Ervin