

The History of Chiliasm

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“What is the origin of this strange doctrine?” you ask. The careful study of church history will furnish us with the conclusive answer. *Premillennialism is a descent of ancient Judaism*. There is a striking resemblance between the off-spring and the parent. The old Jewish conceptions of an external Messianic kingdom have found their perfect embodiment in the Chiliastic theory of the millennium. Premillennialism is a relic of Judaism. Dr. Hodge says of this, “It is a Jewish doctrine. The principles adopted by its advocates in the interpretation of prophecy are the same as have been adopted by the Jews in the time of Christ; and have led substantially to the same conclusions. The Jews expected that when the Messiah came He would establish a glorious earthly kingdom at Jerusalem; that those who had died in the faith should be raised from the dead to share the Messianic reign; that all nations and peoples on the face of the earth should be subject to them; and that any nation that would not serve them should be destroyed. All the riches and honors of the world were to be at their disposal. The event destroyed these expectations; and the principles of prophetic interpretation on which these expectations were founded were proved to be incorrect,” Hodge *Systematic Theology* - Eschatology.

EXAMINATION OF OLD JEWISH WRITINGS

The Judaistic features of Chiliasm can be readily seen by an examination of the Apocalyptic writings of the Jews. The genesis of this doctrine may be found in these writings which are generally dated in the pre-Christian period. The Jews divided the future into two separate periods. The first era is considered to be of a temporal nature and is designated as the kingdom of the Messiah. The second era is of eternal duration and is called the kingdom of God. The transient Messianic kingdom prepares the way for the final setting up of the eternal kingdom of God. This is exactly the position of the Premillennialists of today. Christ’s Messianic kingdom comes first and after that the kingdom of God. That the Chiliasts have incorporated a part of ancient Jewish eschatology in their scheme of the future is very evident. A general survey of the Jewish writings is all that is necessary to establish this fact. In the book of Enoch (chap. 91, 93)

the entire course of the world is divided into ten weeks. At the close of the tenth period the eternal stage begins. In the third book of Sible the Messianic reign is first represented and after it has overcome its enemies, the kingdom of God begins. We find the same distinction in the Psalms of Solomon where the preliminary Messianic kingdom is described as something transitory. In Psalms 17 and 18, and in Psalm 3:12, we read of the resurrection to eternal life.

Coming down to the Christian period we meet this two-fold kingdom idea in the Slavic Enoch and in the Apocalypses of Ezra and Baruch. In these writings the duration of the Messianic period is fixed by a definite number of years. In 4 Ezra 7:28 the reign of Christ lasts four hundred years. After that time Christ with the rest of His earthly creatures, dies. Then the dead awake and the eternal judgment begins. So also in Baruch 40:3 the reign of Christ is represented as lasting till the world comes to an end.

In many of the Jewish writings, the presentation of these two stages has resulted in an orderless confusion. In the Similitudes of the book of Enoch and in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs only one of the two aspects of the future hope is emphasized, whereas the other, while not denied, is nevertheless left in obscurity. For this reason scholars have thought that to bring order in the confusion the various elements were distributed over two successive periods. The Messianic was put first by the Jews as it was thought that the political hopes would first go into fulfillment and thereupon the new order of things should assume its eternal sway, cf. *Pauline Eschatology*, Vos.

Whether the Jews borrowed their materialistic conception in regard to the future kingdom from ancient Babylonian eschatology as is maintained by Dr. Bavinck, Hoekstra, and others, or whether Dr. Vos is correct in ascribing this Jewish view to their own carnal interpretation of Old Testament prophecy, is a question of minor importance for our present purpose. We believe with Dr. Vos that the charge of Babylonianism need not be laid against Chiliasm. It is not difficult for us to understand that Judaism with its external legalism and carnal expectation would come to such a materialistic conception of the Messianic reign. We do not believe that the Jews borrowed their views from heathen eschatology.

The later Jewish eschatology which was written during the time of the apostles and the early church is far more sensualistic than that which precedes. Baruch is especially typical of this sensualistic coloring. He speaks of the destruction of the enemies at Christ's coming. After the evil forces are subdued there will follow a period of prosperity and great joy. It is said that a vine will then have a thousand branches, every branch a thousand clusters and every cluster a thousand grapes, etc. We also read, "In those days reapers will not have to exert themselves, and those that build will not have to toil, for of themselves all work will have progress together with those who labor thereon."

The Jewish Talmud, which is of later origin, tells us that the promised Messiah will destroy the fourth world kingdom which is predicted by Daniel. Israel will be redeemed from the bondage and be gathered from the dispersion to their own land. The Messiah will raise the dead. Jerusalem and the temple will be rebuilt, law and ceremony restored

and the kingdom of glory established. During this time the Gentiles shall live in servitude to Israel and the kings of the world will honor the Messiah with costly gifts and sacrifices.

JEWISH ORIGIN VERIFIED BY NEW TESTAMENT

This expectation of an earthly Messianic kingdom is also spoken of in the New Testament. The Jews were then suffering under the yoke of the Roman Empire as a conquered people. The loss of their independence and the high taxes that had to be paid to the Roman government at this time filled every true Israelite with sadness. They longed intensely for delivery from the yoke of Rome. In former years, the children of Jacob had suffered under the cruel bondage of the Egyptians. The oppression was hard and long but God came to their rescue and delivered them by supernatural power. In like manner, they expected a divine deliverance. The great Deliverer was promised in the Old Testament prophecies. With the coming of the Messiah, they looked forward to the emancipation from Caesar's Yoke. The Jews could no longer be described as truly spiritual minded. From idolatry, they had turned to legalism and externalism. After the Babylonian exile, their whole religious life had lost its spirituality. They considered an outward obedience to the law sufficient to bring them temporal and eternal reward. Instead of seeking God first in their lives, they lived for themselves. Their thoughts were self-centered instead of God-centered. The sense of sin and guilt before a just God was almost entirely forgotten. That the promised Messiah should bring about the great ransom for sin through His substitutionary sacrifice as Isaiah and the prophets had foretold, was no longer remembered. Their whole religious life had reached too low an ebb for such an exalted hope. They were only concerned about themselves in their present bondage. That the promised Messiah would usher in the eternal heavenly kingdom as their prophet Daniel had predicted, was far from their thoughts. They were absorbed with the things of this world and entertained no such spiritual expectation. They could only be satisfied with the prospect of a kingdom in which the Jews could rule over their enemies. They looked for a redeemer from the tyranny of a temporal monarch rather than a Redeemer from sin and Satan. With feverish longing they were looking for a speedy coming of their earthly Messiah. The anticipation of Christ's coming was a matter of general knowledge among all those who dwelt in Palestine. Even Herod had heard of it and at the time of Jesus' birth enquired eagerly from the high priest in regard to the place where Christ was to be born. The announcement of the newborn king had filled him with anxiety. He looked upon the Babe that was born as an earthly rival to his throne. The necessary information was soon received from the chief priests and the scribes, Matt. 2: 4 ff.

The apostle John informs us in the sixth chapter of his gospel that the Jews were ready to take Jesus and make Him king by force after the miracle of the Loaves and Fishes. Jesus, however, withdrew into the mountain. The people had seen the sign and became convinced that He was indeed the prophet that should come into the world. They were, however, only looking for an earthly kingdom. This carnal expectation becomes very evident at the close of the chapter when they murmured because He said He was the

Bread of Life. The inspired writer tells us that this caused many of His disciples to go back and walk no more with Him. Jesus failed to satisfy their longing for an earthly king.

When at a later date the Pharisees asked Him concerning the time of the coming of the kingdom of God, the Lord replied, "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: neither shall they say, Lo, here! or, There! for lo, the kingdom of God is within you." The Pharisees were thinking of an earthly Messianic kingdom which was to come with observation and power. Jesus corrects their mistake by telling them the true spiritual nature of the kingdom. This could not be perceived by the unregenerate mind because the whole nature of that kingdom was elevated far above their realm of thought.

Jesus instructed His disciples by parables in order that they might know the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven." The contrast is sharply drawn between His true followers and the Scribes and Pharisees. The mysteries of the kingdom were hidden from the Pharisees and Scribes because of their carnal-mindedness. The great Dr. Warfield once said, "Had Jesus immediately disclosed Himself as the Messiah of that spiritual kingdom He would not have lived another three weeks. The hatred of His enemies increased in the same proportion as it became more and more evident that He was the promised Christ. The resurrection of Lazarus from the dead was the climax. His Messianic mission then became so evident that immediately steps were taken against Him. That He came to seek and to save the lost and to establish that spiritual kingdom, in which God would be all in all, went against the very grain of their reasoning. The disciples, however, were given to understand the mysteries of the kingdom through His parables. The superlative mystery of that kingdom was contained in its deep spirituality in contrast with the materialistic hopes of the Jews of that time.

The thought of an earthly kingdom was also predominant with Judas Iscariot. He followed Jesus with a purely selfish motive. Judas expected to reap great honor and temporal advantage from the Lord. When he sees that his earthly anticipation would never be attained he turns against his Master and betrays Him for thirty pieces of silver.

The expectation of an earthly kingdom is expressed strongly at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. The rulers together with the people that stood by reproached Him by saying, "If thou art the king of the Jews, save thyself." Their crude conception of Jesus' kingship could not be harmonized with His agonizing pain at Golgotha. This was so because they expected a different Messiah. His death on the cross was to them a convincing argument that Jesus was not the promised king of the Jews. They protested against the superscription of Pilate, "This is the King of the Jews," because they felt ashamed to acknowledge such a one as their king.

Even the disciples of Jesus were not entirely free from this mistaken earthly conception of His kingdom. The mother of the Sons of Zebedee came with the foolish request that one of her sons might sit at His right and another at His left hand when He came in His kingdom. Jesus rebuked her by saying, "Ye know not what ye ask." The disciples still clung to this hope after the resurrection of the Lord. Luke informs us in Acts that their last question to Him just before the ascension was, "Lord wilt thou at this time restore

the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus again corrects their mistaken conception by reminding them of the true spiritual nature of this kingdom. It would be realized through the preaching of the gospel after the Holy Spirit had qualified them for that supreme task. They should be His witnesses both in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth. It was not for them to know the times and the seasons of the final consummation of that heavenly kingdom because the Father had set that in His own authority.

The Chiliastic hope of an earthly kingdom is an importation of the eschatology of the Jews. This, we believe, has been made plain by the foregoing references to the Apocalyptic writings of Judaism as well as from the current expectations among the Jews that prevailed during the ministry of Jesus on earth. Jesus' teaching in regard to the nature and development of His kingdom can only be understood in the light of this fact. This relic of Judaism was still in the subconscious mind of the followers of Jesus before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It touches our hearts with pain to think that this Judaistic expectation which was repeatedly corrected and even severely rebuked by our Master, should again thrive within the present day Christian church.

HISTORICAL SURVEY OF PREMILLENNIALISM

The Chiliastic conception immediately found acceptance in the Christian church. To give a detailed historic account of this doctrine would be going far beyond the bounds of this book, therefore in our discussion we shall limit ourselves to what we consider the most important historical developments of this doctrine.

THE EARLY CHURCH

The Apostolic history shows us that many of the old church fathers were leaning toward this view. So for example Corinthes, who is thought to have been a contemporary of the Apostle John, believed that Christ would have an earthly reign lasting a thousand years with His seat in Jerusalem. Papias in the middle of the second century holds the same view. Likewise, Justin Martyr (about 150 A.D.) says that the majority of the Christians at his time were looking forward to an earthly kingdom, but he adds that there were also good Christians who had other opinions. Irenaeus (latter part of 2nd century) believed that after the destruction of the Roman Empire, Christ would return and would literally bind Satan with a rope.

On the other hand, in many of the writings of the other church fathers, we find no traces of Chiliasm; e.g., no mention is made of it in the two letters of Clemens of Rome, written to the church at Corinth, at about 90 A.D. We also do not find it in the letters of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch at about 100 A.D., nor in the letters written in the latter half of the second century by Polycarpus, Bishop of Smyrna, nor in the polemic writings of Athenagoras and Theophilus of Antioch.

FROM THE THIRD CENTURY TO THE REFORMATION

From the third century onward until the Reformation, Chiliasm made little progress in the Christian church. The decline can largely be ascribed to the extension of Christianity to the Gentile countries and also to the unbroken prosperity which the church then enjoyed. The Gnostic philosophy of this period and the Alexandrian school with its allegorical interpretations of the Scripture were also a great detriment to the progress of Chiliasm. By far the most important figure of this period was the great church father Augustine, whose far reaching influence also in this matter, extended even beyond the Reformation, as his views in this were in the main, accepted by the four great reformers of the sixteenth century. Augustine believed the Old Testament prophecy and Rev. 20 were to be interpreted spiritually; being symbolical of the eternal glory which the church would receive in the other world.

At the time of the crusades, it was again thought that the coming of Christ was at hand, in consequence of which many Christian worshippers returned to Palestine. Whenever war or persecution was present, Chiliasm again received a fresh impetus. In that way, it found acceptance by a number of sects in the middle ages, but it is true, that from the time of Augustine up to the Reformation, Chiliasm had little influence in the Christian church.

CHILIASM REJECTED BY THE GREAT REFORMERS

Chiliasm again revived during the dark period of the Reformation. This was largely due to the degradation of the Roman church at that time and also to the bloody persecutions which the church then endured. The doctrine, as we mentioned before, was rejected by both Luther and the other reformers with such absoluteness that it never appeared in any of their confessions, (Cf. Hoekstra's "Bijdrage tot de Kennis en de beoordeeling van het Chiliasme" pp 29). The Augsburg Confession explicitly states that they reject all those who spread the Jewish opinion, that prior to the resurrection of the dead the pious shall receive the administration of the world and then shall bring the ungodly under subjection, (*Augsburg Confession*, last Art.).

Hallazius reproduces the Reformed and Lutheran view on this subject when he says, "A millennial reign of Christ, characterized by a pre-eminent knowledge of the mysteries of God, by a holy life, and an earthly prosperity for those involved, is not to be expected by God's children in this world," (Cf. Hase, *Hutterus redivivus*, Lpz. 1868, pp. 279).

The view of the Reformed church on this subject finds expression in the *Confession Helvetica*, — "We reject the Jewish fancy that there shall be before the day of judgment a golden age in which the pious shall take over the control of the world after their enemies the ungodly have been subdued, because the Evangelists Matthew and Luke, as seen in Matt. 24-25 and in Luke 18, and also in the apostolic teachings as found in II Thess. 2, and in II Tim. 2, 4, give us quite a different representation," (Art. on Judgment, translated from Dutch). So also in the "Nederlandsche Geloofsbelijdenis" no mention is

made of a glorious reign of peace and prosperity of Christ and the believers and of a double resurrection after the coming of Christ. The last article of this confession explicitly states that the resurrection and final judgment shall both take place at the time of Christ's coming.

LATER GROWTH OF CHILIASM

Chiliasm was also very prominent among the Lutherans of Germany during this time. It especially revived with the Pietists under the influence of the pious Johann Albrecht Bengel in 1750. Soon after this the cold breath of rationalism swept over the whole continent. This was again followed by the bloody campaigns of Napoleon. When all this was going on Chiliasm prospered greatly. Practically all of the theological thinking in Germany and Holland not directly under the influence of the great Reformation, was colored by it. This is especially true of the Vermittelungs-Theologie of Germany represented by Peter Lange, Ebrard, Rothe, Hofmann, Delitzsch, Kurtz, and others in the first part of the nineteenth century. They interpreted the prophecies of Ezekiel about the new temple in a materialistic way and expected the fulfillment at Christ's second coming. Israel shall then be converted and all Levitical ceremonies restored as a retrospective commemoration of Christ's atonement.

Some of the other theologians of this time must be called mild Chiliasts. So, for example, the Dutch theologian Van Oosterzee expected only one return of Christ. This is to be followed by His reign upon earth, during which time part of humanity will live in a state of glory. The general conversion of the Jews and many of the Gentiles will then be realized. After this there will be the general resurrection and judgment. He however thought that the number "thousand" in Revelation 20, "is not arithmetical but a symbolical number; and nothing may be promised or expected of that period which is an irreconcilable contradiction with the principles laid down by Jesus Himself in John 4:21. The predictions of the prophets also as to the national restoration of Israel, must not be regarded alone, but understood according to the rule of Melancthon: the gospel is the interpretation of prophecy," cf. *Christian Dogmatics* of Van Oosterzee, Vol. 2, p. 799.

In our time, the Jewish movement called Zionism deserves special attention in this connection. Special effort is put forth to bring the Jews back to Palestine. It is but natural that this movement is sympathetically observed by many Christians of the present day who are looking forward to the restoration of Israel to the promised land and the speedy inauguration of the millennial kingdom which they suppose will follow. The recent World War has also had an effect in stimulating the belief in this doctrine.

This brief survey of history shows that Chiliasm flourished during times of adversity and hardships. This also accounts for its great progress during the great war.

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