

# CHILIASM

*“How blessed and holy are those who participate in the first resurrection! The second death has no power over them. They will be priests of God and the Messiah and will rule with him for a thousand years” (Rev 20:6).*

## Chiliasm or Millennialism

χίλια is the Greek word for 1000, from which the word chiliasm is formed. Chiliasm is the belief that after his return, the Messiah will rule the world for 1000 years. Today we call this premillennialism.

There are six occurrences of the word χίλια in Rev 20:2-7:

**20:2** An angel will seize the Dragon, that old serpent, the devil, Satan, and bind him in chains for 1000 years.

**20:3** Satan will be thrown into the Abyss so that he can't deceive the nations until the 1000 years are finished.

**20:4** The souls of the martyrs will come to life and reign with the Messiah for 1000 years. The first resurrection.

**20:5** The rest of the dead will not come back to life until the 1000 years have ended.

**20:6** The saints will be priests of God and the Messiah and will reign with him for 1000 years.

**20:7** When the 1000 years end, Satan will be let out of his prison.

There is much evidence in both the Old and New Testaments for a Messianic reign following the Messiah's return to earth, but the above verses are the only evidence that its duration will be 1000 years, a millennium. The period of forty years is used rather loosely for Israel's wandering in the wilderness and the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon. The meaning of 1000 may not be strictly literal, but it is meant to convey the meaning of a very long time if not close to 1000

years. There is no reason to say it will be more or less, or a non-event. The statements made above are very clear.

## **Chiliasm in the early church**

The apostolic history shows us that many of the church fathers leaned toward this view. For example, Corinthes, who is thought to have been a contemporary of the Apostle John. He believed that the Messiah would have an earthly reign lasting 1000 years with his seat in Jerusalem. Papias in the middle of the second century held the same view. Likewise, Justin Martyr (about 150 AD) said that most Christians of his time were looking forward to an earthly kingdom. But he added that there were also good Christians who had other opinions. Irenaeus (latter part of the 2nd century) believed that after the destruction of the Roman Empire, the Messiah would return and would literally bind Satan with a rope.

## **From the third century to the Reformation**

Chiliasm made little progress in the church during this time. The decline can largely be ascribed to the extension of Christianity to new countries and 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 Scriptures 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 in this matter extended beyond the Reformation, as his views on this were in the main, accepted by the four great reformers of the sixteenth century. Augustine believed the Old Testament prophecies and Revelation 20 were to be interpreted spiritually, symbolical of the eternal glory that the church would receive in the other world.

At the time of the crusades, it was again thought that the coming of the Messiah 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 several sects in the Middle Ages, but from the time of

Augustine up to the Reformation, chiliasm had little influence in the Christian church.

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 Matthew 24-25 and Luke 18, and also in the apostolic teachings as found in 2 Thessalonians 2 and 2 Timothy 2, 4, give us quite a different representation” (Article on Judgment, translated from Dutch). So also, in the ‘Nederlandsche Geloofsbelijdenis’, no mention is made of a glorious reign of peace and prosperity of the Messiah and the saints, or two resurrections after the Messiah’s return. The last article of this confession explicitly states that the resurrection and last judgment will both take place at the time of the Messiah’s coming.

A glance at those chapters soon shows that their arguments are weak. It is an argument from silence. Just because something is not mentioned somewhere doesn’t mean it is not true, especially if it is attested by other Scriptures. Paul taught that at the Messiah’s return, the dead in Christ will rise from their graves (1 Thess 4:16). There is no evidence here of a general resurrection, only Christians are mentioned. Paul said that each person will be resurrected in the proper order: first, the Messiah, then those who belong to the Messiah, when he comes (1 Cor 15:23). He doesn’t even mention the resurrection of the wicked. Perhaps he is concentrating on those who receive an immortal, supernatural body at the Resurrection. This leaves us with the question as to whether the wicked will be resurrected bodily. Rev 20:13 simply says that the sea and Hades gave up the dead that were in them. But in Jn 5:28-29 Jesus says that a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out, some to the resurrection of life and others to the resurrection of judgment. Rising from the grave sounds like a bodily resurrection.

## **The resurrection of the righteous**

Paul says that the Lord will descend from heaven with a cry of command and the dead in Christ will rise, but he says nothing about

the wicked. He is only interested in the resurrection and rapture of the righteous.

Dan 12:2 and Jn 5:29 don't make a distinction in the timings of the resurrections of the righteous and the wicked, but because of progressive revelation, we must respect the apostle John's words. The martyrs will come back to life and rule with the Messiah for 1000 years, but he explicitly says that the rest of the dead don't come to life until the 1000 years are over. Rev 20:4b-5 calls the resurrection of the martyrs 'the first resurrection', necessitating a second.

The saints of all ages will be resurrected at this time, not just those who were beheaded in the Great Tribulation. For the last 2000 years, the Messiah has been building his church community, and they will all reign with him. The martyrs are singled out for special mention as they are in focus, and they may even be the majority during the final years of this age. The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders who surround God's throne sing a new song, saying that the Messiah had purchased people from every tribe, language, people, and nation and made them to be a monarchy and priests for God and that they would reign *over the earth* (Rev 5:9-10). In addition, Dan 7:27 says that the kingdom, authority, and magnificence of all nations *of the earth* would be given to the saints of the Most High. And Paul says that if we die with the Messiah, we will also live with him, and if we endure, we will also reign with him (2 Tim 11-12a).

Matt 24 and parallel passages are concerned with signs leading up to the Lord's return, not with events that follow. But Matthew does record Jesus' teaching about his reign on earth. Jesus said, when he comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him (Matt 25: 31-32a). Again, he said, that when he sits on his glorious throne in the new age, his disciples will also sit on twelve thrones, governing the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28). Both those passages make it clear that the Messiah's reign and judgment will take place here on earth.

John Calvin wrote in his Institutes that millennialism is a 'fiction' that is 'too childish either to need or to be worth a refutation'. The Anglican Church originally formalized a statement against millenarianism in the Anglican Articles. This is observed in the 41st of the Anglican

Articles, drawn up by Thomas Cranmer (1553), describing the millennium as a 'fable of Jewish dotage', but it was omitted at a later time in the revision under Elizabeth (1563). John Calvin was a great theologian, but he didn't say much about eschatology, it wasn't his strength. In his commentary on the New Testament, he omitted the book of Revelation. It is a fact that all the major Protestant Reformers neglected the apocalyptic Scriptures, and they especially ignored the Messianic reign. They embraced the return of the Messiah, judgment day, and the existence of heaven and hell, but influenced by Augustine and Platonic thinking, they were too heavenly-minded to see a bright future for this material world. Augustine's idea was that the Kingdom of God consisted of eternal life with God in heaven. And unfortunately, this is what most people in the traditional churches still believe today. The belief has no substance to it, there are no details about how it would eventuate. It is not based on a sound interpretation of what Jesus taught when he spoke about the Kingdom of God.

To say that millennialism is fiction is not true. Revelation 20 speaks of the millennium six times, and twice it is stated that those who share in the first resurrection would reign with the Messiah for 1000 years. It is a formidable challenge to have great theologians like the Reformers and Augustine speaking against chiliasm. I hope that my arguments equating the Kingdom of God with Messiah's reign will throw more light on the subject.

In Roman Catholic theology, the Kingdom of God is identified with the Roman Catholic Church, an identification again due to Augustinian influence. The Reformers emphasized a spiritual and invisible side of the kingdom, a spiritual sovereignty that is exercised through the preaching of the word and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. With the Enlightenment, the kingdom came to be increasingly understood as individualistic; with grace and peace ruling in people's hearts. Then in liberal theology, it developed in a moralistic direction, or the forward march of social righteousness and communal development. How far from the truth do things develop when the thoughts of man become more important than the natural interpretation of God's word.

## **Amillennialism**

General beliefs of people with an amillennial persuasion:

1. They reject the idea that Jesus will reign over the earth for 1000 years.
2. They hold that the Kingdom of God equates with the church and the spread of the gospel.
3. They hold that the Messiah is presently reigning through the church.
4. They hold that Satan was bound from the ascension, or Pentecost so that he is prevented from deceiving the nations!
5. They hold that the saints reign spiritually on earth (Augustine), or that they will reign with the Messiah in heaven.
6. They hold that the first resurrection (Rev 20:6) refers to either regeneration (Augustine) or ascension to heaven (Hoekema and Hendriksen).

It is not just the way different sides interpret the Kingdom of God that is important, a correct interpretation should result in all the Kingdom of God verses having a satisfactory consistent meaning. I believe that this can only occur when we look at them through the right-colored glasses. Rather than starting with a certain philosophical or eschatological view like amillennialism, and then trying to interpret the New Testament accordingly, we need to start by recognizing that the Gospels were written as a record of the arrival of the prophesied Jewish Messiah and that Jesus' use of the terms 'Son of Man' and 'Kingdom of God' are to be interpreted as referring to the Messiah and his reign respectively.

It is sometimes claimed by amillennialists that when Jesus told Pilate that his kingdom was not *from* this world (Jn 18:36), he gave evidence that the Kingdom of God was not earthly. However, most commentaries agree that the Greek text relates to the source and nature of the kingdom. The preposition 'ek' typically means 'from'. Jesus was not denying that his kingdom would be in the world, he was saying that his kingdom was from God and not from man.

It is also claimed that the Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus and the apostles is unaccompanied by millennial ideas. Jesus didn't mention the millennium, but the following verses certainly refer to the

messianic reign, especially in terms of first-century Jewish thought: Matt 8:11, 19:28, 25:31-34, Luke 22:39-30. Apart from Jesus' own words, the Gospel writers have added more material: Mk 11:10, Luke 1:32-33. The book of Revelation is all about the Messiah and his final victory over evil and his enemies. The climax is expressed in kingdom terms: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah, and he will rule forever and ever" (Rev 11:15). BAG interprets it as the Lord assuming sovereignty of the world. In both Rev 11:17 and Rev 19:6 we are told that the Lord God Almighty has begun to reign. The verb is an inceptive aorist; it is the Messiah who has begun his reign on earth.

There are some amillennialists (Hoekema, Storms) who see the necessity of an earthly reign of Israel to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies so that the Messiah's reign might be disclosed in history (Storms p. 348). Storms' alternative to the 1000-year millennium is that these promises will be fulfilled on a new earth, which inaugurates the eternal state! However, can it be called historical when it no longer happens on this current earth? When this present earth disappears (Rev 20:11), the Messiah will hand over his kingdom to the Father. We have no revelation of what happens after that.

Amillennialists claim that their teaching on the Kingdom of God has no national limitations. Jesus and the apostles indeed avoid talking about Israel and Jerusalem in this context, and there were political reasons for that, but Paul in Rom 11:25-26 endorses the prophecy that a Deliverer would come from Zion and banish ungodliness from Jacob and that all Israel would be saved. He spends the whole of chapter 11 stressing the fact that God has a future for Israel. He said a partial hardening had come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles had come in.

Jesus left no doubt that he was the awaited Jewish Messiah. The Old Testament prophecies provide us with many details, and some of these are quoted in the New Testament. When Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, he said that David was a prophet who knew that God had promised with an unbreakable oath that one of his descendants would sit on his throne (Acts 2:30). Where else could that be but Jerusalem? And who else could that be but Jesus, the Messiah?

The most compelling evidence for a rebuilt temple in the last days is in Paul's words to the Thessalonians about the man of sin, the Antichrist. Paul said he would oppose and exalt himself above every so-called god and object of worship and seat himself in the sanctuary of God and declare that he is God (2 Thess 2:4). The Greek word **ναός** is the normal word for temple, or more specifically the inner sanctuary. In his arrogance, the Antichrist will exalt himself above God. In the current political situation, building a new temple at Mount Moriah would be highly controversial, however, a Jewish group has already made the plans and furnishings for a new temple. On comparing this verse with Matt 24:15, it undoubtedly refers to a temple in Jerusalem.

As to the restrainer in 2 Thess 2:7, God is the ultimate restrainer of lawlessness, but what means does he employ? That restraint has always existed and enabled human society to be law-abiding because God's moral law was written on their hearts. However, the secularization of society results in the Judeo-Christian ethical code being rejected. That is the rebellion (2 Thess 2:3). Paul says the Day of the Lord and Jesus' return will not occur unless the rebellion comes first. Society will rebel against God. With globalization, that will mean a worldwide rejection of God, the church, and Israel. The Bible will be banned. There will be apostasy in the church. The power of the state to maintain order will break down and a lawless man will get his chance to rule the world. This rejection of God's moral law is happening right now, it doesn't need the rapture to allow it to happen. The secret power of lawlessness is already at work, but the restrainer will continue to restrain until he is removed, and then the lawless one will be revealed (2 Thess 2:7-8a).

Most amillennialists claim that there is no expectation of the renewal of this world. But Jesus spoke about a time when the Messiah would sit on his glorious throne in the renewed creation. Jesus said no one has given up all for the Kingdom of God who will not receive many times as much *in this world*, as well as eternal life *in the age to come* (Luke 18:30). And Paul said that *the creation itself would also be set free from corrupting bondage to share the glorious freedom of God's children* (Rom 8:21). Peter also preached about the restoration of the world. The Messiah must remain in heaven until *the time of universal*

*restitution*, which God announced long ago through the voice of his holy prophets (Acts 3:21).

Amillennialists hold that there is only one resurrection, even though there are at least six verses scattered throughout the New Testament that lead us to believe otherwise. In Matt 24:31 it is *the elect* whom the angels gather from the four winds. On comparing this verse with 1 Cor 15:52 and 1 Thess 4:16-17, there can be no doubt that this gathering refers to the *resurrection of the righteous*. In Luke 14:14 Jesus tells his Pharisee host that he would be repaid for his good deed in *the resurrection of the righteous*. In Luke 20:35, Jesus speaks of *those who are considered worthy* of taking part in *that age* and the resurrection *from* the dead. This resurrection of the righteous immediately precedes the messianic age. In 1 Cor 15:23, it is *those who belong to the Messiah* who are resurrected. In 1 Thess 4:16, it is *the dead in Christ* who will rise first, while 2 Thess 2:1 speaks of *our being gathered together to him*. And finally, Rev 20:4-5 says that the first resurrection precedes the resurrection of the rest of the dead by 1000 years!

Amillennialists leave no room for the saints to judge and rule the world and angels. They ask how perfect saints in glorified, resurrected bodies can live together with unbelievers during the millennium. After Jesus' resurrection, he made appearances from another realm for 40 days before he ascended to heaven. We will be like him. The saints in their resurrected bodies will be able to travel in the same way between Earth and the New Jerusalem.

The basic problem with the amillennial interpretation of the last things is its orientation. Amillennialists start with the belief that heaven must be our home and destination; a result of Platonic dualism thinking. They feel that the earth is evil or beyond redemption and not a worthy place for the Messiah or God the Father to live or for the saints to spend eternity. They ignore the fact that the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God and that the throne of God and the Lamb will be in that city. So, when the Messiah comes, that's the end of the Earth for them; it must immediately be destroyed. However, when God created the earth, he put mankind in charge of it, and he walked in the garden in the cool of the day. Despite being cursed because of sin, the Messiah has redeemed a faith community for himself and he will lift

the curse and restore the world during the millennium. He is not ashamed to call us his brothers, and together we will rule the world. Man is body, soul, and spirit; without his body, he is not complete, and his natural habitat is the Earth.

## **Amillennialism's Achilles heel**

Here, I present 19 New Testament passages, which from a normal, unbiased, natural reading, collectively teach that the Messiah and his saints, will reign over the earth. In rejecting a literal kingdom on earth, amillennialists have developed their own reign of the Messiah and his saints from heaven, even though there is not one verse of Scripture that supports the idea that Jesus is presently ruling or will ever rule the earth from heaven. There are many references to the Messiah's exaltation to the right hand of the Father and his ministry in heaven, but not once does it say that the Messiah rules the earth from that position. It is God the Father who rules the universe. God the Son, as the second person of the Trinity rules with him, but is subject to him (1 Cor 15:28). Father and Son are equal in essence or being, but not in their roles. After the resurrection, Jesus sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time *he waits* for his enemies to be made his footstool (Heb 10:13). Jesus, the Messiah, has been appointed by God the Father to rule on earth as King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev 19:15-16). When the enemies are defeated at the battle of Armageddon, the Messiah will rule the earth with the saints.

**Matt 5:5** How blessed are those who are humble, because it is they who will *inherit the earth*.

**Matt 19:28** When the Messiah sits on his glorious throne *in the renewed creation*, his apostles will also sit on twelve thrones, *governing the twelve tribes of Israel*.

**Matt 25:31-32a** When the Messiah comes in his glory and all the angels are with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All *the nations* will be assembled before him, and he will separate them, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

**Luke 1:32-33** Jesus will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him *the throne of his*

*ancestor David. He will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will never end.*

**Luke 17:19** The king told him, ‘Well done, good servant! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of *ten cities*.

**Luke 22:29-30** *I confer a kingdom on you, just as my Father has conferred a kingdom on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit down on thrones to govern the twelve tribes of Israel.*

**Rom 8:17, 19** If we are children, *we are heirs*, heirs of God and co-heirs with the Messiah, if we share in his sufferings so that we may also share in his glory. *The creation* is eagerly awaiting the revelation of God’s children.

**1 Cor. 6:2** The saints will rule *the world*.

**1 Cor 15:25** The Messiah must rule until he has put all his enemies under his feet (Cf. Isa 9:7).

**2 Tim 2:12** If we endure, *we will reign with him*.

**Heb 2:5, 8a** For God did not put *the coming world* we are talking about under the control of angels ... *he put everything under man’s feet*.

**Rev 2:27** He who conquers will rule *the nations with an iron scepter*, shattering them like clay pots.

**Rev 3:21** To the one who conquers *I will give a place to sit with me on my throne*, just as I conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

**Rev 4:4** Around the throne were 24 other thrones, and on them sat 24 elders wearing white robes and victor’s crowns.

**Rev 5:10** You made them a kingdom and priests for our God, and they will reign *on the earth*.

**Rev 11:15b** *The kingdom of the world* will become the kingdom of the Lord and his Messiah, and he will rule forever.

**Rev 12:5** The woman gave birth to a son, a boy, *who is to rule all the nations with an iron scepter*, but the child was snatched away and taken to God and his throne.

**Rev 19:15** A sharp sword comes out of his mouth to strike down *the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod* and tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.

**Rev 20:4** Then I saw thrones, and *those who sat on them were given authority to judge*. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or hands. *They came back to life and ruled with the Messiah for a thousand years.*