The History of Ancient Premillennialism & Rise of Amillennialism

- Overview of Premillennialism
- Ancient Premillennialism
- The Historical Development of Amillennialism
- School of Antioch vs. School of Alexandria
Ancient Premillennialism (return of Christ will inaugurate a millennium):
[-------] 300 A.D.

Amillennialism (no earthly millennium):
[--------------------------------------------] 250 A.D.

Postmillennialism (second coming will conclude a millennium):
……|------------------------------------------- -
1652  1703

Ancient Premillennialism
……..|-------------------------------------------- ----------------
1627

Modern Premillennialism
…….|-------------------------------------
1820
I. Ancient Premillennialism: Introduction:

- Earliest church fathers in the Christian faith did not attempt to synthesize or systematize eschatology.
- There was no eschatological dispute regarding millennialism for the first 300 years of church history.

“Four chief moments dominate the eschatological expectation of early Christian theology—the return of Christ, known as the Parousia, the resurrection, the judgment, and the catastrophic ending of the present-world order. In the primitive period they were held together in a naïve, unreflective fashion, with little or no attempt to work out their or solve the problems they raise.” ~ J.N.D. Kelley
Premillennial Observations:

A. It has long been established by scholars of all eschatological persuasion that the orthodox position in the early church was premillennial.

1. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, says:
“The ancient and popular doctrine of the Millennium was carefully inculcated by a succession of fathers from Justin Martyr and Irenaeus—who conversed with the immediate disciples of the apostles—down to Lactantius, who was the preceptor of the son of Constantine. It appears to have been the reigning sentiment of all orthodox believers. It was productive of the most salutatory effect upon the faith and practice of Christians.” [I, 15, ii].”

2. Amillennialist like Ned Stonehouse says in his doctoral dissertation that premillennialism was once the orthodox doctrine [*The Apocalypse in the Ancient Church* (Goes, Holland: Oosterbaan & LaCointre), 3ff].

3. Jaroslav Pelikan, “And Augustine set the standard for most catholic exegesis in the West when he surrendered the millenarian interpretation of Revelation, to which he had held, in favor of the view that the thousand years of that text referred to the history of the church” [*The Christian Doctrine: A History of the Development of Doctrine, I: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (100-600) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 1: 127.
Ancient Premillennialism Concepts:

A. Earliest writers after the apostles believed the following: Christ would physically return to earth, earthly reign of Christ, the future Anti-Christ, a bodily resurrection of believers, and a Final Judgment of the unsaved.

B. Adherents include Pothinus, Justin Martyr, Melito; Hegesippus, Tatian, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, & Apollinaris.

C. Second Coming is an imminent hope.

D. The visible appearing of Jesus Christ at the Second Coming.

E. Believed in an eschatological (future) Anti-Christ.

F. Practical Focus on the hope of the resurrection of believers.

G. Anticipated a future bodily resurrection of believers.

H. The time of the judgment of the unsaved is seen to be at the Second Advent.
Ancient Premillennialism Example:

A. Papias (70-155 A.D.):

“There will be millennium after the resurrection from the dead, when the personal reign of Christ will be established on this earth.” ~ Ante-Nicene Fathers, “Fragments of Papias,” VI, from Eusebius Ecclesiastical History III, 39, 1: 154.
Ancient Premillennialism Example:

B. Justin Martyr (100-168):

George Peters in *Theocratic Kingdom* cites the conclusion in Herzog’s *Cyclopaedia*, “Chiliasm constituted in the sec. century so decidedly an article of faith that Justin held it up as a criterion of perfect orthodoxy (1:480).”

“The prophets have proclaimed two advents of His: the one already past…but the second when, according to prophecy, He shall come from glory, accompanied by His angelic host, when also He shall raise the bodies of all men who have lived, and shall clothe those of the worthy with immortality and send those of the wicked into everlasting fire with the wicked devils” (*First Apology*, 52).
Ancient Premillennialism Example:

Justin Martyr (100-168):

“But I and whatsoever Christians are orthodox in all things do know that there will be a resurrection of the flesh, and a thousand years in the city of Jerusalem, built adorned, and enlarged, according as saith of this thousand years (ch. 65:17), ‘Behold, I create a new heavens and new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind; but be ye glad and rejoice in those which I create: for, behold, I create a Jerusalem to triumph, and my people to rejoice,’ etc. Moreover, a certain man among us whose name is John, being one of the twelve apostles of Christ, in that revelation which was shown to him prophesied, that those who believe in our Christ shall fulfill a thousand years at Jerusalem; and after that the general, and in a word, the everlasting resurrection, and last judgment of all together. Whereof also our Lord spake when He said, that therein they shall neither marry, nor be given in marriage, but shall be equal with the angels, being made the sons of the resurrection of God.”
Ancient Premillennialism Example:

C. Irenaeus (130-202):  


2. He claims that the millennial kingdom and the resurrection are actualities, not allegories (Ibid., chap. 35, p. 564-566).

3. The first resurrection introduces this promised kingdom in which the risen saints are described as ruling over the renewed earth during the millennium, between the two resurrections (Ibid., chap. 32-35, p. 561-566).
I. Ancient Premillennialism:

D. Tertullian (160-240):

1. Tertullian attempted to list the order of last day events: (1) the plagues, (2) Babylon’s doom, (3) Anti-christ’s warfare on the saints, (4) the devil cast into the bottomless pit, (5) the advent, (6) the resurrection of the saints, (7) the judgment, (8) and the second resurrection, (9) with the harvest at the end of the world, (10) and the sixth seal extending to the final dissolution of the earth and sky, in which he included the stars (Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, chap. 25, in *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, 3: 563; *Against Hermogenes*, chap. 34, 496-97).

2. Believed that the millennium follows the resurrection of the dead:
   “Our inquiry relates to what is promised in heaven, not on earth. But we do confess that a kingdom is promised to us on the earth, although before heaven, only in another state of existence; inasmuch 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 πολιτευµα, or citizenship, is in heaven, he predicates of it that it is really a city in heaven. This both Ezekiel had knowledge of and the Apostle John beheld…. [Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, book 3, chap. 25 in *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, 3: 342-43].

   “of the heavenly kingdom this is the process. After its thousand years are over, within which period is completed the resurrection of the saints, who rise soon or later according to their deserts, there will ensue the destruction of the world and the conflagration of all things at the judgment: we shall then be changed in a moment into the substance of angels, even by the investiture of an incorruptible nature, and so be removed to that kingdom in heaven” [Ibid., 343].
E. Hippolytus (First Systematic Expositor) (d. 236):

1. Hippolytus, bishop of Rome and its vicinity, was unquestionably one of the most learned scholars and theologians of his day. He was a contemporary of Origen and a voluminous author including a commentary, “On Daniel,” and “Treatise on Christ and Antichrist.”

2. In his commentary on Daniel, in common with other church fathers, believes that he is waiting for the division of the Roman Empire into ten predicted kingdoms which in turn be followed by the coming of the dread Antichrist, who would terribly persecute the saints. All of this would then be terminated with the glorious personal advent, accompanied by the first resurrection (that of the righteous) to establish the earthly physical kingdom, with the Antichrist destroyed at His arrival. Then will follow the fiery damnation of the wicked [Hippolytus, Fragments From Commentaries, “On Daniel,” fragment 2, chaps. 3-4, in Anti-Nicene Fathers, 5: 179.

3. Hippolytus’ “Treatise on Christ and Antichrist” is one of the most incredible expositions of predictive prophecy from the third century.
Ancient Premillennial Differences:

A. Lack of agreement regarding the timing of the resurrection of the saved:
   1. Clement (d.101?) placed it at the Second Advent;
   2. *The Epistle of Barnabas* placed it before the kingdom (*Epistle 5*),
   3. The author of the *Didache* placed it after the Tribulation but before the Second Advent).

B. Lack of agreement regarding the details of the earthly kingdom.

C. Lack of agreement regarding the purpose of the kingdom:
   1. *Second Clement* saw it as a time of rest for believers & worldwide rule by Christ (17);
   2. *The Epistle of Barnabas* spoke of it as a time of holiness in which Christians live & rule the earth (6);
   3. The *Didache* portrayed it as a time prepared for the church (9);
   4. Ignatius believed it to be a future residence for believers (*To the Ephesians* 16; *To the Magnesians* 5).
II. Ancient Premillennialism (150-300):

A. In 150-300 A.D. an emergence of two tendencies appeared in the interpretation of futuristic themes:

“Some, such as Justin Martyr & Tertullian, viewed prophetic passages with a literalistic sense, seeing a coming kingdom on the earth and a triumphant King. Others, such as Origin and Dionysius of Alexandria, spiritualized the same passages, arguing for a reign of Christ through the church in the redeemed.” ~ John Hannah.

B. Possible cause for growing shift may be due to the following three influences:

1. **Philosophically**: The growing impact of Platonism which emphasizes the inner spiritual reality over and against the physical aspects of life;

2. **Politically**: The lack of persecution & positive growth of church from dramatic deliverance via imminent coming to the present manifestation of Christ over the church.

3. **Theologically**: Premillennialism suffered a loss of respectability in the Catholic Church in view of radical religious/theological groups like Montanists who happen to embrace premillennialism.
The Decline of Premillennialism: Summary

“All admit that premillennialism after the third century waned and lost its hold on the majority of the church. It was the time of the rising strength of the Roman Church. Both the theological and political atmosphere was against it. While there was a continued minority who held premillennialism both within and without the Roman Church, they were not very local and were quite ineffectual in continuing a strong testimony. The Reformers, while returning to true doctrine in many areas, accepted Augustine as the starting point for their theology, and for the most part accepted without much consideration his opposition to premillennialism. The fact that premillennialism was held by fanatical sects did not give it much standing. It remained for the renewal of Scriptural studies some time after the Reformation to turn the attention of a large portion of the church again to the premillennial question.”

~ Dr. John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 123.
II. The Rise of Amillennialism:

A. The rise of the allegorical school of interpretation replaced the literal method used in the first two centuries of the church.

1. Origen (185-254) appears to be the first theologian to spiritualize the future earthly reign of Jesus Christ may be due to the following:

   a. Platonic presupposition, which emphasizes the spiritual over the material whereby the knower grasps reality as a whole in terms of ideas and particularly in terms of the highest and most inclusive idea of the good; Origin viewed materialism as a shadow of a greater nonphysical significance;

   b. Personal tactic of defending the authority of the Bible by means of interpreting difficult passages non-literally;

   c. Chastisement of church leaders for interpreting the Scriptures in strict accord with Jewish literalism which is “elementary knowledge”…a higher sense is obtained by interpreting the text “spiritually.”

   d. Belief that the kingdom of heaven is to be interpreted as growth in faith and life by the Christian in the present. Therefore, the “kingdom” is not a physical geographic concept so much as it is a spiritualized realm in the hearts of God’s people (Commentary on Matthew, 10.14 cf. Hannah, Our Legacy, 311).
II. The Rise of Amillennialism:

2. Philo, Jewish thinker & exegete (20 B.C.-A.D.50):
   a. He was the most important figure among the Hellenistic Jews of his age and was a prolific writer.
   
   b. Philosophical mystic and eclectic religious thinker.
   
   c. His most influential achievement was his development of the allegorical interpretation of Scripture which enabled him to combine the O.T. with his personal aspirations for a more spiritual interpretation of the Law; Greek & Jewish elements were interwoven together:
3. Clement of Alexandria (150-215):
   A. Clement was a theologian and philosopher; some say he was an Athenian by birth.
      1. Clement agreed with Gnostics in believing that religious knowledge or illumination to be the chief element of Christian perfection.
      2. The only true knowledge was that which presupposed the faith of the Church, Apostolic in its foundation, and possessing Divine revelation.
      3. He supplemented this presupposition with the ideas of Greek Platonic philosophy.
The Rise of Amillennialism:

C. The influence of St. Augustine:

“It is difficult to overestimate the importance of Augustine in the history of theology. Not only did his thinking crystallize the theology which preceded him, but to a large extent he laid the foundations for both Roman Catholic and Protestant doctrine. B. B. Warfield, quoting Harnack, refers to Augustine as “incomparably the greatest man, whom, ‘between Paul the Apostle and Luther the Reformer, the Christian church has possessed.’” [Warfield, Studies in Tertullian and Augustine, p. 114].

Two Reasons for Augustine’s importance:

1. No acceptable exponents of amillennialism before Augustine (very few scholars consider building upon the theology of the leaders of the School of Alexandria).

2. Augustine’s views became the prevailing doctrine of the Roman Church, and it was adopted with variations by most of the Protestant Reformers along with many other of his teachings.

~ Dr. John F. Walvoord, Millennial Kingdom, 47.
The Rise of Amillennialism:

B. Some of the Beliefs of Clement of Alexandria (150-215):

1. He regarded Greek Platonic philosophy as a Divine gift to humanity.

2. Christ, the Logos, the second Person of the Divine Trinity, was both the source of human reason and the interpreter of God to mankind.

3. He became man in order to give a supreme revelation, and that through Him men might partake immortality.

4. He saw ignorance and error as a more fundamental evil than sin, and though he held that not all men would attain to the highest level of blessedness, he took an optimistic view of the ultimate destiny of even the most erring.
The Alexandrian School of Theology:

A. History:

1. Alexandria, Egypt came into prominence in 3rd Century in Alexandria, Egypt which was the second city of the Roman Empire, the center for both Hellenism and Semitism, with the largest community of Jews in any single city of the ancient world.

2. It was the center of Christian thought in the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries through the famous Catechetical School under Clement, Origen, and during the 4th-5th centuries through its bishops Athanasius and Cyril.
The Alexandrian School of Theology:

B. Theology:

2. Allegorized all Scripture.
3. Attracted to Mysticism.
4. Tendency to believe in Tritheism.
5. Heresies such as Adoptionism, Nestorianism, Apollinarism, Monophysitism, and later Monothelitism were developed from this school of theology.
6. Opposed the literal and historical method of Antioch.
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The Antioch School of Theology

A. History:

1. Established in Antioch of Syria by church leaders in Antioch, Syria in the third century.

2. It was created in reaction to the allegorization of Scripture and the extremes of Origen and other Alexandrians.

3. Its tendency was Aristotelian and historical, in contrast to the more Platonic and mystical traditions of Alexandria, Egypt.

4. The curriculum emphasized the normal-literal interpretation and was purposely opposed to the allegorical method at the School of Alexandria.

5. Antiochians were influenced by the prominent Jewish community in Antioch who insisted in literal Semitic exegesis rather than Platonic preconceptions.
The Antioch School of Theology

A. History:

5. Earliest representatives of Antiochian exegesis were Theophilus (ca. 115-188), bishop of Antioch and Dorotheus (ca. 240-312); both laid the foundation of the school.

6. The second and most influential period of the school began in 4th century under Diodorus of Tarsus (d. 393), the teacher of Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350-428), and John Chrysostom, who later became bishop of Constantinople and perhaps the greatest preacher of the early church.

7. The divergence between Antioch and Alexandria is most evident in the Christological controversies of the 5th Century.

8. The school of Antioch began to lose its hermeneutical influence in the 4th-5th Centuries as a result of theological controversies. Some of the teachers were accused of departing from orthodoxy in the Nestorian controversy. As a result, the school lost some of its credibility. Additionally, its influence diminished when the church split into Eastern and Western divisions. (see Premillennial Dictionary of Theology ed. Mal Couch, “Hermeneutics, Antiochian School” by Dr. Gordon Johnston (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000).
The Antioch School of Theology

B. Theology:

1. Developed the Historical-Grammatical Approach.

2. Stressed the importance of Hebrew and Greek exegesis, historical backgrounds, and recognition of figures of speech.

3. Every passage has only one plain meaning conveyed by words and grammar.
The Antioch School of Theology

B. Theology:

4. The literal meaning cannot exclude metaphor as opposed to the Alexandrians who argued that the literal meaning of a text did not include its metaphorical meaning.

5. Antiocheans insisted on predictive prophecy and indirectly predictive typology viewed retrospectively through progressive revelation to substantiate the unity of the O.T. and N.T.

6. They were at times inconsistent with their position in view of their excesses with typology.