

The Millennium and the Ante-Nicene Fathers

by
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Millennialists and Dispensationalists often point to the preponderance of chiliastic views among the church fathers as evidence that their position is apostolic, but was lost following the conversion of Emperor Constantine and the growth of the state church. It is known that among the Ante-Nicene fathers there were a variety of opinions regarding last things. Among those who were proponents of Chiliasm were Tertullian, Commodian, Lactantius, Methodius, Justin Martyr, and the heretic Apollinaris of Laodicea. Among those who opposed these views were Caius, Origen, Dionysius the Great, Eusebius. Among the Nicene and Post-Nicene fathers, Jerome and Augustine were opponents of millennialism.

Despite the number of Ante-Nicene fathers who were proponents of chiliasm, it is interesting to note that the chiliastic views of these early church fathers were not contained in any church creed, nor were they part of any form of devotion. As Hans Schwartz writes, “The emerging Christian community was not about speculation but preparedness, not about out-guessing the Lord but being faithful to the call.”¹

It is clear that the Ante-Nicene church fathers interpreted the apocalyptic portions of scripture in light of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition. These Jewish apocalyptic texts are interesting in the variant ways they portray the end times. In some of these texts, the judgment of the ungodly occurs prior to the advent of an everlasting “millennial” kingdom. In other of these texts, the rule of the messiah over the earth occurs prior to the judgment and the advent of the everlasting kingdom.

- In 1 Enoch, history is portrayed as being divided into 10 periods of time, called “weeks.” Weeks 1-7 retell history from the beginning to the time of the Macabees. Then a golden age begins, described in 1 Enoch 93:12-16, in which the messiah rules. At the end of the messianic kingdom there will be a great judgment, the old heaven will be done away with, and a new sinless heaven created.²
- *4 Ezra* (also known as 2 Esdras) is a Jewish apocalyptic book, commonly included in the Apocrypha, which consists mainly of seven visions of Ezra the scribe. In this book, which some Christian traditions still consider to be part of the canon of scripture³, the kingdom reign of Christ on the earth is stated to last for a period of 400 years. “And whosoever is delivered from the foresaid evils shall see my wonders. For my son Jesus shall be revealed

¹ Schwartz, H. *Eschatology*. p. 321. 2000. Grand Rapids. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

² Book of Enoch. In R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*. (1913) Oxford, Clarendon Press. Retrieved from http://wesley.nnu.edu/biblical_studies/noncanon/ot/pseudo/enoch.htm

³ The Ethiopian and Russian Orthodox consider 4 Ezra (2 Esdras) to be part of the canon. In other Christian traditions it is part of the Apocrypha, which are considered to be books that are not inspired, but are useful.

with those that be with him, and they that remain shall rejoice within four hundred years” (4 Ezra 7:28-29).⁴

- The *Sibylline Oracles* 3:817-818 state that “And then shall God send from the East a king, Who shall make all earth cease from evil war.”⁵
- 2 *Baruch* contains many apocalyptic references: 24:1-4; 30:1-5; 39:3-8; 40:1-4. In 2 *Baruch* there are allusions to the millennial kingdom, the final judgment, and the establishment of an everlasting kingdom. 2 *Baruch* 40:1-3 states: “The last ruler who is left alive at that time will be bound, whereas the entire host will be destroyed. And they will carry him on Mount Zion, and my Anointed One will convict him of all his wicked deeds and will assemble and set before him all the works of his hosts. And after these things he will kill him and protect the rest of my people who will be found in the place that I have chosen. And his dominion will last forever until the world of corruption has ended and until the times which have been mentioned before have been fulfilled.”⁶
- *The Book of Jubilees* (a.k.a. Jubilees) also contains many apocalyptic references: 1:4-29; 23:14-31.⁷

These documents are important because they portray the interpretive structure through which the early church viewed the eschatological portions of scripture. In other words, the Jewish apocalyptic literature formed their interpretive paradigm. It wasn't until the church had become primarily Gentile, and until the church was removed by time and geography from the Jewish apocalyptic sources, and until the canon of scripture had become relatively fixed, that it was possible for the church to view the texts as a whole and as scripture, apart from non-canonical and uninspired texts.⁸

Of the Ante-Nicene fathers, Lactantius is explicit in connecting his chiliastic views to the *Sibylline Oracles*, as well as a number of other sources.⁹ Lactantius writes: “And as God laboured during those six days in creating such great works, so His religion and truth must labour during these six thousand years while wickedness prevails and bears rule. And again, since God, having finished His works, rested the seventh day and blessed it, at the end of the six thousandth year all wickedness must be abolished from the earth, and righteousness reign for a thousand years; and there must be tranquility and rest from the labours which the world now has long endured.”¹⁰

⁴ 4 Ezra (OR 2 Esdras), from The Holy Bible, King James Version (Apocrypha) Bible. Retrieved from <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Kjv4Ezr.html>.

⁵ The *Sibylline Oracles*. (M. S. Terry, Trans., 1899) Retrieved from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/sib/sib05.htm>.

⁶ Baruch 1. Retrieved from <http://www.carm.org/lost/1baruch.htm>.

⁷ The Book of Jubilees. In R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*. (1913) Oxford, Clarendon Press. Retrieved from http://wesley.nnu.edu/biblical_studies/noncanon/ot/pseudo/jubilee.htm.

⁸ Irenaeus (b. 130-202 AD) was a disciple of Polycarp, who was himself a disciple of the Apostle John. Irenaeus quoted from all the books we now accept as scripture. Origen (b.185-254 AD) published a similar list of N.T. scripture texts, 70 years after Irenaeus. From the earliest days, collections of accepted texts were bound together into a Codex; by compiling these Codexes, we can determine what books the early church accepted as part of the canon, meaning the “rule of faith.”

⁹ Schwartz, H. *Eschatology*. p. 324. 2000. Grand Rapids. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

¹⁰ Lactantius. *The Divine Institutes*. 7.14, in *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, 7:211

While we give great weight to the writings of the church fathers, we do not grant them equal weight with scripture, nor with the creeds and confessions of the church. No private writing of an individual is a source of doctrine, nor may we use these private writings to define the content and boundaries of orthodoxy. As the Apostle Peter wrote, “No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation” (2 Pet 1:20). Regarding the creeds and confessions of the church, the resurrected Christ himself said: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). But that these creeds and confessions are not themselves inspired we know from the words of the Apostle Paul: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim 3:16). The claim of inspiration is nowhere made for the creeds and confessions of the church; however, these writings are clearly of more value than the private writings of individuals, for the Holy Spirit works through the church to preserve His truth over and against error.

It is clear, as we have shown, that the early church lived in an earnest expectation of our Lord’s immanent return. The precise nature of the eschatological hope was a matter of some conjecture, and the early church fathers were heavily influenced in their understanding by a variety of Jewish apocalyptic writings. Therefore we should not give the early church fathers any great weight in either the development or the support of our eschatological position.