

# 17. CHILIASM

*Blessed and holy are those who participate in the first resurrection! The second death has no power over them. They'll 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 seizes the Dragon, that old serpent, the devil, Satan, and bind him in chains for 1000 years.

**20:3** Satan is 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 come to life and reign with the Messiah for 1000 years; the first resurrection.

**20:5** The rest of the dead don't come back to life until the 1000 years are over.

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

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

There is much evidence in both the OT and NT 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 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 hindrance 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 OT 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. Revelation 20:13 simply says that the sea and Hades gave up the dead that were in them. But in John 5:28-29 Jesus says 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 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.

Daniel 12:2 and John 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. Revelation 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'll all be resurrected together and 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, Daniel 7:27 says that the kingdom, authority, and magnificence of all nations under heaven would be given to the saints of the high places. And Paul says that if we die with the Messiah, we'll also live with him, and if we endure, we'll also reign with him (2 Tim 11-12a).

Matthew 24 and parallel passages are concerned with signs leading up to the Lord's return, not with the events that follow. But Matthew does record Jesus' teaching about his reign on earth. Jesus said that when he comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he'll 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 after his return.

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 NT, 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's 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 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. Amillennialists reject a literal 1000-year reign of Christ on the Earth despite Revelation 20:4: They came to life and reigned with Christ a 1000 years, and 20:6: They'll be priests of God and Christ and will reign with him for a 1000 years. And 5:10: You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they'll reign over the Earth.
2. They believe that when Jesus returns, the eternal state is inaugurated without any intervening millennium, despite Jesus saying: I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And: Blessed are the meek, for they'll inherit the Earth (Mt 5:3). And: Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world (Mt 25:34). And: To those who are victorious and does my will to the end, I'll give authority over the nations – they'll rule them with an iron scepter and dash them to pieces like pottery – just as I received authority from my Father (Rev 2:26-27). And: I saw the Holy City, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God (Rev 21:2), and: The nations will walk by its (New Jerusalem) light, and the kings of the Earth will bring their splendor to it (Rev 21:24).
3. They interpret the millennium as either the reign of Christ in his Church during this age or the reign of the martyrs after death in the intermediate state. None of the 140 kingdom verses in the NT teach either of these.
4. If the kingdom of God is not correctly interpreted, the millennium is not understood. Kingdom means kingship, kingship that is exercised by a king and his monarchy, and is expressed by their reign. A third of kingdom verses refer to the Messiah (by metonymy), a third to his monarchy (referring to his disciples) and a third to the millennium (those in a future context). At least forty kingdom verses teach us something

about the millennium. Ex. Mt 6:10, 7:21, 8:11-12, 13:43, 20:21, 26:29).

5. Amillennialists believe that Christ and the saints presently reign on Earth, despite the whole world being under the control of the evil one (1 Jn 5:19). What sort of king do they think Jesus is if he allows Satan to control world affairs?
6. Revelation 11:15-17 teaches us that the millennium is a future event beginning when the seventh trumpet sounds. At that moment, the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah. He takes his great power and begins to reign. The aorist verb is repeated in 19:6 and means, our Lord God Almighty has become king or has begun to reign.
7. Romans 8:17 declares that as God's children, the saints are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. If they suffer with him, they'll share in his glory. Their inheritance is the kingdom, prepared for them since the creation of the world (Mt 25:34). Daniel defines it more clearly: Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the saints of the high places. Their kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and all rulers will serve and obey them (Dan 7:27).
8. When Christ is called a co-heir, it implies that he has not yet received his inheritance and is not yet the ruling Messiah as described in Daniel 7:14. All nations and peoples of every language will not worship him until after his return as king. His coming on the clouds to receive authority, glory, and sovereign power is still future (Mk 14:62).
9. Amillennialists teach that Satan was bound during Jesus' ministry, because Jesus said: How can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? (Mt 12:29). The context is Jesus' exorcisms. Did Jesus tie him up? Hebrews 2:14 says: So that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death. And 1 John 3:8 says: The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. Neither verse mentions tying the devil up. As Jesus' exorcised demons before his death, these verses prove nothing. Jesus showed himself stronger than Satan when

he was tempted, and as the Messiah, he had no problem with casting out demons. Satan is not bound; the whole world is under his control (1 Jn 5:19). He'll be ejected from heaven during the Great Tribulation, after which he'll wage war on God's people. A prowling lion is not bound!

10. In Revelation 20:1-3 John saw Satan seized, bound with a great chain, and incarcerated in Hades to keep him from deceiving the nations during the millennium. Then the tribulation martyrs came to life and reigned with Christ, the first resurrection. The rest of the dead didn't come to life until the 1000 years ended. Augustine suggested coming to life might mean regeneration. Isaiah 24:21-23 prophesied this incarceration.
11. The phrases 'end of the age' (Mt 13:39-40, 49, 24:3, 28:20) and 'the age to come' (Mt 12:32, Mk 10:30, Lk 20:35, Eph 1:21, Heb 6:5) are significant. Jesus isn't returning at the end of the world; he returns at the end of the Church age, to be followed by the Messianic reign (Rev 11:15). The Earth and the heavens flee from God's presence after the millennium (Rev 20:11).

A correct interpretation of end-of-age events should result in all the kingdom of God verses having a satisfactory, consistent meaning. Rather than starting with a certain philosophical or eschatological view like amillennialism, and then trying to interpret the NT 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' should be interpreted as referring to the Messiah and his expected reign.

Some think that when Jesus told Pilate that his kingdom was not of 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 implying that his kingdom was from God.

It is also claimed that the kingdom of God as taught by Jesus and the apostles is unaccompanied by millennial ideas. Jesus didn't need to mention the millennium; he consistently spoke about the kingdom of God, which in terms of first-century Jewish thought is the Messianic

reign (Mt 8:11, 19:28, 25:31-34, Lk 22:39-30). Apart from Jesus' own words, the Gospel writers added more material (Mk 11:10, Lk 1:32-33). Every kingdom of God verse in a future context relates to the Messianic reign, and thus the millennium. Kingdom verses in a present context either refer to Jesus himself as Messiah or to his disciples as his monarchy.

There are some amillennialists (Hoekema, Storms) who see the necessity of an earthly reign of Israel to fulfill the OT 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 if 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 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. Immediately after his baptism, he began to preach: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. This is metonymy, it was he, the Messiah who was near, not the kingdom. The OT prophecies provide us with many details, and some of these are quoted in the NT. 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

everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be 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 Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24:15, it undoubtedly refers to a temple in Jerusalem.

As to the restrainer (2 Thess 2:7), God is the ultimate restrainer of lawlessness, but what means does he employ?

Restraint has always existed and enabled human society to be law-abiding, whether due to God's moral law or civil authority. However, the secularization of society has resulted in the Judeo-Christian ethical code being rejected, and the rebellion Paul spoke about (2 Thess 2:3) may be about civil authority. He said the Day of the Lord and Jesus' return won't occur unless the rebellion comes first. When the law-enforcer is removed from the scene, the man of lawlessness will be revealed, and this will also result in apostasy in the church. 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. We see it happening, and the cause is a mystery. 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). 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 Matthew 24:31 it is *the elect* whom the angels gather from the four winds. On comparing this verse with others, there can be no doubt that this gathering refers to the resurrection of the righteous (1 Cor 15:52, 1 Thess 4:16-17). 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. It's only those who belong to the Messiah who are resurrected (1 Cor 15:23). It's only the dead in Christ who will rise first (1 Thess 4:16). It's only we Christians who are being gathered together to him (2 Thess 2:1). In fact, the first resurrection precedes the resurrection of the rest of the dead by 1000 years! (Rev 20:4-5)

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. not realizing that the unbelievers will live on Earth while the saints will be in New Jerusalem. After Jesus' resurrection, he appeared many times from another realm for 40 days before ascending to heaven. We'll be like him. The saints in their resurrected bodies will be able to travel in the same way between Earth and 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 resurrected Messiah or God the Father to live, or for the resurrected saints to spend eternity. They ignore the fact that New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God and that the throne of God and the Lamb will be in that city. The final chapters of Revelation leave us in New Jerusalem close to the Earth. 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 with them 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'll lift the curse and restore the world during the millennium. He is not ashamed to call us his brethren,

and together we'll rule the world. Man is body, soul, and spirit; without his body, he's not complete, and Earth is his natural habitat.

## **Amillennialism's Achilles heel**

The following nineteen NT passages, 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) not beforehand. When the enemies are defeated at the battle of Armageddon, the Messiah will rule the Earth with the saints.

**Mt 5:5** Blessed are the humble, for they'll inherit the Earth.

**Mt 19:28** When the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne in the rebirth (of Israel), you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, governing the twelve tribes of Israel.

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

**Lk 1:32-33** He'll be great and he'll be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will install him on the throne of his ancestor David and he'll rule over Jacob's descendants forever. His reign will never end.

**Lk 19:17** The he said to him: Well done, good servant! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities.

**Lk 22:29-30** I confer kingship on you, just as my Father conferred it on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my monarchy and sit on thrones governing the twelve tribes of Israel.

**Rom 8:17, 19** As we are children, we are heirs, both heirs of God and co-heirs with the Messiah. That is, if we share in his sufferings so that we may also share in his glory. ... The creation waits with eager longing for God's children to be revealed.

**1 Cor 6:2** Don't you know the saints will judge the world?

**1 Cor 15:25** He (the Messiah) must rule until he puts all his enemies under his feet (Cf. Ps 110:1).

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

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

**Rev 2:26-27** To the conqueror who does my will to the end I'll give authority over the nations. He'll rule them with an iron staff and shatter them like clay pots.

**Rev 3:21** I'll allow the conqueror to sit with me on my throne, just as I conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

**Rev 4:4** Twenty-four thrones surrounded the throne, and twenty-four elders in white robes and wearing victor's crowns sat on them.

**Rev 5:10** You made them to be a monarchy and priesthood for our God, and they'll reign on Earth.

**Rev 11:15b** The kingdom of the world has become that of your Lord and his Messiah, and he'll rule forever and ever.

**Rev 12:5** The woman bore a son who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter, but the child was caught up to God and his throne.

**Rev 19:15** A sharp sword was coming out of his mouth to strike the nations. He'll rule them with an iron scepter and trample the grapes in the winepress of the fury of God Almighty's wrath.

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