

What Did Christians Close to John the Apostle Believe about the Millennium?

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It has been said that one can use church history to prove just about anything. There is some wisdom to that old adage and that is why we must be careful when we use church history to support what we believe. Also, evangelicals have often rightly declared that as important as church history is, our doctrinal beliefs must first and foremost be grounded in Scripture. Thus, the proper perspective is to pay close attention to church history and learn from it, but also understand that Scripture takes priority over church history when it comes to what we should believe.

With that in mind, however, I do think church history is helpful when it comes to the controversial issue of the nature of the millennium that is discussed in Rev 20:1–10. On six occasions in this passage the Apostle John speaks of a reign of Christ that is a “thousand years.” Throughout church history, Christians have sparred over what John meant by a thousand-year reign of Christ. Premillennialists say this reign takes place on earth after the second coming of Christ but before the eternal state. In this case, the millennium is future from our current standpoint in history. Amillennialists, on the other hand, say the millennium is a spiritual reign of Christ that takes place in this current age between the two comings of Jesus. Thus, the millennium is not a future reign of Jesus but a current reign.¹

So how can church history help us on this controversial issue of the millennium? It can benefit us as we look at the millennial beliefs of those who had some connection with the Apostle John, the one who penned Rev 20:1–10. It can also help as we look at the beliefs of those in close geographical proximity to Asia Minor where the Apostle John lived later in his life. Our argument is this—*we think it probable that those who had a close association with John would also have a correct understanding of what John meant by the millennium.*

First, let’s look at two individuals who had some connection historically with John—Papias and Irenaeus. Papias (A.D. 60–130) was Bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia, Asia Minor. He was a contemporary of Polycarp.² According to Martin Erdman, Papias “represented a chiliastic tradition which had its antecedents in Palestine.”³ Papias’s dependence on the oral teachings of the apostles and elders has been documented by both Irenaeus and Eusebius.⁴ Eusebius points out that Papias received “doctrines of the faith” that came from the “friends” of the twelve apostles.⁵ Eusebius also said of Papias, “It is worth while observing here that the name John is twice enumerated by him. The first one he mentions in connection with Peter and James and Matthew and the rest of the apostles, clearly meaning the evangelist.”⁶ Papias,

¹ Postmillennialists agree with amillennialists that the millennium takes place between the two comings of Christ, but argue that this reign of Christ must mean that the world will get progressively better until it has been Christianized.

² Polycarp (A.D. 70–155) was Bishop of Smyrna and most importantly for our purposes, was a disciple of John the Apostle. Because of his connection to the apostle John, Polycarp was viewed as a protector of true doctrine. According to Irenaeus, Polycarp was converted to Christianity by the apostles. He was made a bishop and had communicated with many who testified that they had seen Jesus.

³ Martin Erdman, *The Millennial Controversy in the Early Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 107. For our purposes here we are following the lead of Erdman in viewing chiliasm and premillennialism as mostly synonymous.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III. 39.2.

⁶ Ibid., 39.5.

thus, saw himself as possessing the teachings of the apostles. As Eusebius notes, “And Papias, of whom we are now speaking, confesses that he received the words of the apostles from those that followed them.”⁷ Irenaeus also refers to Papias as “a hearer of John.”⁸

It appears that Papias had close connections with the apostles and John the Apostle in particular. So did he hold a particular millennial view? He did—Papias was a premillennialist. Eusebius records that Papias believed things that “came to him from unwritten tradition” and “teachings of the Saviour.” Among these beliefs were “that there will be a millennium after the resurrection of the dead, when the kingdom of Christ will be set up in material form on this earth.”⁹ Thus, with Papias we have a case of a Christian who had close access to John the Apostle and was convinced that the kingdom of Christ was future and earthly.

Next, Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 202) was born in Asia Minor and later became the bishop of Lyon. As a youth Irenaeus had listened to Polycarp who probably had personal contact with John and other apostles.¹⁰ Irenaeus was not as directly associated with John as Papias, but the historical connection through Polycarp is still significant. Irenaeus knew someone who knew the Apostle John. As with Papias, Irenaeus was also a strong believer in premillennialism. In fact, premillennialism was a major weapon in Irenaeus’s battle against Gnosticism and its unbiblical dualism between matter and spirit.¹¹ Irenaeus used premillennialism and the idea of an earthly kingdom to fight the gnostic view that matter was evil that and God was not interested in redeeming the earth. Erdman points out that “The book *Adversus Haereses* is also one of the most important sources of millennial expositions in the ante-Nicene literature.”¹²

So with the cases of Papias and Irenaeus we have two people who had a historical connection with John the Apostle who affirmed premillennialism. Is it possible that these two men were simply wrong about the millennium? Did they misunderstand John? Of course it is possible, but is it likely? We think not.¹³ It is more likely that they held to premillennialism because John himself taught this view.

Another historical factor we must keep in mind is that those in geographical proximity to John also believed in premillennialism. John lived his later years in Ephesus in Asia Minor. Erdman refers to the premillennialism of Asia Minor in the second century as “Asiatic millennialism.”¹⁴ He also notes that “the decisive authority of Asiatic millennialism is John, from whom the elders claimed to have obtained their information. Moreover, John, as again stated by Papias, ascribed the origin of millenarianism to Christ.”¹⁵ Thus, the evidence indicates that Christians of Asia Minor held to premillennialism. Other associated with Asiatic millennialism include Tertullian, Commodian, and Lactantius. In fact, the pervasiveness of premillennialism in the early church in general was so great that Philip Schaff once declared:

⁷ Ibid., 39.7.

⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book V. 33.4.

⁹ *Ecclesiastical History*, 39.11–12.

¹⁰ Erdman, 108.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of how Irenaeus used premillennialism as a weapon against Gnosticism see Erdman, 107–29.

¹² Ibid., 109.

¹³ Eusebius himself believed Papias was mistaken.

¹⁴ Ibid., 107–134.

¹⁵ Erdman, 111.

The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment. It was indeed not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion, but a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers, such as Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Methodius, and Lactantius.¹⁶

If premillennialism was the intended view of John the Apostle it seems natural to think that those who knew him or had a close association with him would also affirm premillennialism. And, if John the Apostle lived in Asia Minor it appears likely that those Christians near his area of influence also would have similar views as John on the millennium. We cannot be absolutely certain of these estimations, but they do appear probable. On the other hand, for amillennialism or postmillennialism to be correct, we have to believe that those who had close connections with John, either personally or geographically, were woefully wrong with their views of the millennium. In our view, this is possible but not probable.

In closing, we understand that the case for a particular millennial view does not rest solely on what certain Christians in the early church believed. Scripture, not church history determines the correctness of a theological view. But it seems to us that the historical argument is on the side of premillennialism since people close to John held premillennial views and premillennialism was the overwhelming view of those in Asia Minor and the church as a whole of the second century.¹⁷

¹⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids. Eerdmans, 1973), 2:614.

¹⁷ We are not saying that every single Christian of the second century was a premillennialist, but premillennialism was clearly the dominant view.