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PREMILLENNIALISM

As a variety of Christian eschatology, premillennialism teaches that the Second Coming of Christ (see Parousia) will occur before his establishment of a thousand-year kingdom of peace and justice on the earth (see Millennium). Advocates point to a variety of biblical passages for support: those promising a future 'peaceable kingdom' (Isaiah 2, 11, Jeremiah 31-33, Micah 4) and various apocalyptic texts (Ezekiel 36-39, Daniel 7-12, Zechariah 1-6, the 'little apocalypse' in Mark 13, and Revelation). Premillennialism's most important text is Rev. 20: 1-10, which describes the binding of Satan (see Devil) and two resurrections separated by a thousand year reign of Christ.

Premillennialism in one form or another is found throughout the history of Christianity, though the term itself was not used until the 19th century. Earlier it was called 'chiliasm,' from the Greek *chilia* (thousand). The core beliefs of premillennialism are as follows: as the present age draws to a close, a number of 'signs of the times' will be revealed, including 'wars and rumors of wars' (Mark 13: 7), natural disasters and famines, religious apostasy, moral decay, the rise of Antichrist and the great tribulation, at the end of which Christ will

return to bind Satan, defeat Antichrist at the Battle of Armageddon, resurrect the righteous dead, and establish his millennial kingdom in Jerusalem.

These beliefs began circulating in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, when the church experienced occasional but intense persecution by the Roman Empire. Drawing on apocalyptic texts, Justin Martyr (ca. 100-ca. 165) predicted the rise of Antichrist, the great tribulation, the return of Christ, two resurrections separated by 'a thousand years in Jerusalem, and the final judgment (*Trypho*, 80-81, 110). Irenaeus of Lyons used texts from both testaments to come to similar conclusions (*AH*, 5.25-36). Tertullian connected such ideas with the 'new prophecy' of Montanism, which predicted the descent of the New Jerusalem in Asia Minor and the dawning of the Age of the Spirit (*Marc.*, 3.25). Chiliasm is also found in *The Epistle of Barnabas* (15) and the *Divine Institutes* (14-27) of Hippolytus (ca. 170-ca. 235).

Such views were not universally held. *Origen of Alexandria* rejected chiliasm as a relic from Judaism and adopted an allegorical reading of Revelation (*Prin.*, 2.11). When Christianity found favor in the Empire in the 4th century, Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260-ca. 340) rejected chiliasm's condemnation of Rome and linked the church's success to the Empire's (*EH*, 10). When Rome fell in the 5th century, Augustine divided the City of God and the City of Man and used an

allegorical reading of Revelation to argue that during the time between Christ's first and second comings, the saints, living and dead, reigned with Christ in a spiritual millennium (*City*, 20.7-20).

In the medieval period, it is difficult to find a systematic presentation of premillennialism, though many of its apocalyptic elements are detected in the rationale and expectations for the Crusades and in Joachim of Fiore's alternative to Augustine in his 13th-century *Exposition of the Apocalypse*. The Taborites, the violent followers of J. Huss (ca. 1370-1415) in the 15th century, used prophecy to fight both popes and emperors in anticipation of Christ's return.

Most leaders in the magisterial Reformation followed Augustine's eschatology, though they often used apocalyptic prophecy to label their enemies. Protestant radicals frequently adopted premillennialist themes. T. Muntzer (ca. 1490-1525), M. Luther's former student and ally, used chiliasm to encourage the bloodshed of the Peasants' Revolt. M. Hoffman (ca. 1495-1543) predicted Christ's return to Strasbourg in 1533; and in the mid-1530s the Anabaptists in charge of Münster declared the city the New Jerusalem, placed it under OT law, and prepared for the war leading up to the Second Coming. Virtually all the major Protestant confessions called chiliasm a heresy.

Premillennialism experienced a revival among the English Puritans of the 17th century, thanks especially to J. Mede (1586-1639) of Cambridge, who predicted Christ's return in 1736, to be followed by his millennial kingdom. His views were adopted by the 'Fifth Monarchy Men,' who unsuccessfully sought to establish a government of the saints in anticipation of Christ's return. Underpinning O. Cromwell's (1598-1658) Commonwealth were many prophetic views that looked forward to a new king and kingdom in the near future. After the Restoration, I. Newton (1643-1727) kept premillennialism alive in England, as did J. Bengel (1687-1752) in Germany.

Starting in the late 18th century, another premillennial revival occurred in England. At gatherings at Albury Park and Powerscourt Estate in the late 1820s and early 1830s, these new premillennialists affirmed a literal interpretation of biblical prophecy, the restoration of the Jews to the Holy Land, the apostasy of Christendom, the decline of civilization, the imminent return of Christ, and the millennial kingdom. There were disagreements too, especially on how to understand the Book of Revelation. *Historicists* believed the book contained prophecies covering the whole of the age of the church, while *futurists* believed that it pointed to events just prior to the Second Coming. For some time historicists prevailed (e.g., the Millerites in the USA in the 1840s); but the futurists had strong leaders in E. Irving (1792-1834)

and J. Darby (1800-1882). Many Plymouth Brethren followed Darby's doctrinal system – dispensationalism – which included the pre-tribulational rapture, in which the church escaped the Antichrist's tribulation.

Dispensationalism had its greatest success in the USA, to which Darby traveled often after the American Civil War. Though initially rejected by postmillennialist-leaning evangelicals, dispensationalism eventually won a following, thanks to Bible and prophetic conferences, Bible institutes, and best sellers like *The Scofield Reference Bible* (1909). By World War I, it was widely accepted in fundamentalist and Pentecostal circles (see Fundamentalism, Pentecostal Theology). Its popularity continues, thanks to other best sellers like *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and the *Left Behind* series (1995-2004). Since the 1980s, many American premillennialists have used Bible prophecy to organize politically in support of the state of Israel and a strong military. Although most modern scholars prefer some form of 'realized eschatology,' premillennialism retains a significant following among those who believe that the Bible contains a discernible and detailed blueprint for the future.

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