

THE APOSTLE JOHN AND ASIA MINOR AS A SOURCE OF PREMILLENNIALISM IN THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

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One of the central features of early patristic eschatology was the belief in the premillennial return of Christ. It has generally been accepted among conservative scholars that this doctrine held currency in the ante-Nicene period. As Froom says: "This conception of the reign of resurrected and translated saints with Christ on this earth during the millennium—popularly known as chiliasm—was the increasingly prevailing belief of this time."¹ Only with the allegorizing tendencies of first the Alexandrian theologians, especially Origen, and later the African bishop Augustine did the doctrine eventually fall into disrepute.

Although there has been a general consensus that the early Church was premillennial in its eschatological expectation, the question of that doctrine's origin among the first fathers of the Church has been the focus of considerable discussion. In addition to texts from the canonical Scriptures usually cited by the fathers in support of the doctrine (e.g. Isa 65:17-25; Ps 90:4; 2 Pet 3:8; Rev 20:4-6; *et al.*), certain noncanonical apocalyptic sources are frequently suggested by modern writers as possible contributors as well (e.g. *1 Enoch* 10:19; 2 *Apoc. Bar.* 29:5; *Jub.* 4:29-30; 23:27; *et al.*). But whatever the varied beads of apocalyptic data—written and/or oral—strung together by the early millenarian fathers to support their concepts of the coming kingdom, the strand upon which those beads all hung was the same. That strand, the Johannine teaching on the millennial reign of Christ, was conceived on the isle of Patmos but nurtured in Asia Minor.

The most direct teaching in Scripture on the millennial reign of Christ is found in the Revelation given to the apostle John, especially chap. 20. As Burnet summarizes the case, "St. John out-liv'd all the rest of the Apostles, and towards the latter end of his life, being banish'd into the Isle of *Pathmos*, he writ his *Apocalypse*; wherein he hath given us a more full and distinct account of the Millennial kingdom of Christ, than any of the Prophets or

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¹L. E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1950), 1. 251. T. Burnet is even more to the point: "And to make few words of it, we will lay down this Conclusion. That the Millennial kingdom of Christ was the general doctrine of the Primitive Church, from the times of the Apostles to the Nicene Council, inclusively" (*The Sacred Theory of the Earth* [London: J. McGowan, n.d.] 346). E. Sauer insists that this fact "can only be overlooked by want of care or insufficient acquaintance with the history of theology" (*From Eternity to Eternity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954] 141).

Apostles before him.”² It is instructive to note that most of the early adherents of premillennialism, or chiliasm as it was first called, either had direct contact with this longest living apostle or with his most famous disciple, Polycarp. Tradition says that John spent the latter portion of his life at Ephesus in Asia Minor.³ The origin of the views of perhaps seven early fathers who have been named with varying degrees of frequency as premillennarians may be traced in some way to the Asia Minor geographical context and the apostle who reportedly survived until the time of Trajan (A.D. 98-117).⁴

I. THE EARLY PREMILLENARIANS IDENTIFIED IN THE ASIA MINOR CONTEXT

Asia Minor was both the scene of the closing years of John’s ministry and the fountainhead of premillenarian concepts. It was home to the apostolic fathers Polycarp bishop of Smyrna (c. A.D. 70-155/160) and Papias bishop of Hierapolis (c. 60-130/155) and the apologists Melito of Sardis (second century A.D.) and Apollinaris of Hierapolis (c. 175). On his way to a martyr’s death in Rome, Ignatius of Antioch (died c. 98/117) paused in Smyrna long enough to become acquainted with Polycarp and to write more than half of his extant epistles. And though not Justin Martyr’s (c. 100-165) home either, with Ephesus as the probable place of his conversion and scene of his famed dialogue with the Jew Trypho, Asia Minor had a marked influence upon Justin’s life and doctrine. For the polemicist Irenaeus (120-202), the last and greatest of the Asiatic fathers, Smyrna was the probable birthplace of both the man and his theology.

In addition to the influence of these Asiatic fathers on the eschatological views of future Church leaders, Asia Minor became the spawning ground for less-than-orthodox apocalyptic notions as well. For example, around the turn of the first century Cerinthus, whose home was in Ephesus, included in his heretical potpourri of doctrines the notion that at Christ’s coming a millennium characterized by sensuous pleasures would be established to precede the consummation of all things.⁵ In the second century the heterodox teachings of Montanism would embroider Tertullian’s concept of the end times. Montanus’ views were first enthusiastically embraced in the Phrygian town of Pepuza in southwestern Asia Minor. When the roots of early views on the coming kingdom of Christ are examined, there can be little question that geographically Asia Minor was the most effective incubator for primitive premillennialism.

²Burnet, *Sacred* 346.

³Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; 3.3.4; Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.1.1; 3.31.1; 5.24.3-4.

⁴Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.3.4.

⁵Irenaeus reported that on one occasion in Ephesus the apostle John had gone to bathe at the local bathhouse. Upon learning that Cerinthus was already there, however, “he rushed out of the bathhouse without bathing, exclaiming, ‘Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within’” (Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.3.4).

II. THE EARLY PREMILLENNIARISMS EVALUATED ON THE BASIS OF LITERARY FACTORS

While the premillennialism of Papias,⁶ Justin⁷ and Irenaeus⁸ cannot be assailed with success, some cursory evaluation of the ascription of premillennial views to Polycarp, Ignatius, Melito of Sardis, and Apollinaris of Hierapolis must be made. The task of determining the millenarian views of these fathers is made difficult by a variety of factors. Two of the most important of these are the nature of the writings themselves and/or the degree to which the literature has survived. The writings of the apostolic fathers Polycarp and Ignatius, for example, are pastoral in form, tone and intent. They neither aim for nor accomplish a systematic presentation of early Christian doctrine. In them we find occasional references to select doctrinal concepts rather than specific theological definitions. Froom's analysis is substantially correct:

The situation in the Christian church, immediately following the apostles, did not require an extensive literature of its own. Men were expecting important changes in the world. The authoritative teaching of the apostles was, of course, still fresh in memory, and the struggle between Christianity and paganism had not yet assumed any large proportions. It was the twilight period, before the literature of the early church philosophers had developed. Their first writings were not so much history, exposition, or apologies, as simply letters.⁹

The epistolary evidence by which to establish the doctrines of Polycarp and Ignatius is indeed meager. For the former there are only seven letters (in shorter and longer versions) and for the latter only one, plus the account of his martyrdom.

In the case of the apologists Melito and Apollinaris, although the circumstances are different the outcome remains the same. As the first theologians of the Church, the apologists could reasonably be expected to present a rather full exposition of doctrinal themes. The problem in many cases, however, as with our subjects here, is that their works have survived principally in fragments only. Given the factors of the intent of the writer and/or the limited extent of his extant works the task of establishing the stance of many of the early Church fathers on any given doctrine frequently requires primary dependence upon circumstantial evidence. In many respects such evidence is weighty and convincing. In others, the jury continues deliberation and hopes for new revelation—divine or otherwise. But for four of the fathers under consideration here, in our opinion the mostly circumstantial evidence is weighted in favor of the premillennial position. With these factors and limitations in mind, the evidence for the premillennialism of Polycarp, Ignatius,

⁶See Papias *Fragments* 4 and 6.

⁷See Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 80-81.

⁸See Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.30-36.

⁹Froom, *Prophetic*, 1. 205-206.

Melito and Apollinaris is treated within the context of the influence of the apostle John in Asia Minor.

III. THE EARLY PREMILLENARIANS ASSOCIATED WITH JOHN AND ASIA MINOR

1. *Polycarp (c. A.D. 70-155/160)*. Polycarp bishop of Smyrna, site of one of the seven churches of Revelation (2:8-11), was held in high esteem in the early Church because of his tutelage under the apostle John. This contemporary of Clement of Rome, Ignatius and Papias has the least disputed apostolic connection. His own pupil Irenaeus relates that

Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna, whom I also saw in my early youth, for he tarried [on earth] a very long time, and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true.¹⁰

Tertullian maintained that Polycarp was installed as bishop of Smyrna by John himself.¹¹

Almost no one seriously questions Polycarp's association with the beloved disciple. In addition to the clear statements of Irenaeus in this regard, no chronological or geographical obstacles to the claim can be produced. If as generally assumed Polycarp was born around A.D. 70, he would have been well into his adult years before John's death at the end of the first or beginning of the second century. And with a scant forty-five Roman miles (a journey of just over two and a half days) separating Ephesus and Smyrna,¹² regular intercourse between the apostle and his disciple would have been eminently possible. Indeed if Polycarp was ordained bishop of Smyrna by John himself as Tertullian suggests, then the young church leader must certainly have availed himself of the counsel and instruction of his apostolic mentor at every possible opportunity.

The question of Polycarp's millenarian views is not so easily dispatched. We know from Irenaeus that Polycarp was the author of a number of epistles, for he spoke of "the letters which he sent either to the neighboring churches for their confirmation, or to some of the brethren, admonishing and exhorting them."¹³ Regrettably only one lone epistle addressed to the church at Philippi

¹⁰Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.3.4. Cf. Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.20.5. Unless otherwise stated all patristic quotations in this study are from ANF or NPNF.

¹¹Tertullian *Prescription Against Heresies* 32. J. B. Lightfoot estimates that "Polycarp was thirty years old, or possibly more, before the death of this last surviving Apostle" (*The Apostolic Fathers* [Macmillan, 1889-1890], 2. 1.441).

¹²W. H. Ramsay, *The Historical Geography of Asia Minor* (London: John Murray, 1890) 164. A Roman mile equalled 1,614.6 yards (1,760 yards = a statute mile). It is estimated that one could walk an average of seventeen miles per day on a Roman road (see C. F. Pfeiffer and H. F. Vos, *The Wycliffe Historical Geography of Bible Lands* [Chicago: Moody, 1968] 455).

¹³See Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.20.8.

remains. Add to this the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, a letter from the church at Smyrna to the Phrygian church of Philomelium, and the extant writings by or about Polycarp are just barely plural.

Owing to the fact that only one of Polycarp's letters has survived and that but a very brief epistle, little is known of the views of one who was in a position to tell us so much. In any case the nearest thing we have to a direct statement of millenarianism in Polycarp is this: "If we please Him in this present world, we shall receive also the future world, according as He has promised to us that He will raise us again from the dead, and that if we live worthily of Him, 'we shall also reign together with Him,' provided only we believe."¹⁴

But rather than the Smyrnan bishop's own words, it is John and Irenaeus who are usually cited in support of Polycarp's millennialism. The authority Irenaeus gave for his belief in the unparalleled fertility of the coming millennial kingdom, "when the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead," was "the elders who saw John the disciple of the Lord." "And these things are borne witness to by Papias," Irenaeus went on to say, "the hearer of John, and a companion of Polycarp."¹⁵ As a disciple of the author of the Apocalypse and the instructor of Irenaeus—whose premillennial views are beyond dispute—and on the strength of Irenaeus' testimony, Polycarp's inclusion in the premillenarian camp seems altogether appropriate.

The case for this conclusion is strengthened further when one considers that the doctrine of the premillennial reign of Christ was reckoned the orthodox view of the day. As Kelly points out, it "count[ed] in [Justin's] eyes as an unquestioned article of orthodoxy."¹⁶ Erickson is even more pointed in his assessment of Justin's position:

[Justin] regarded belief in the resurrection as indispensable to Christian faith. Those who do not hold this view are not entitled to be called Christians. He noted two subclasses of Christians: those who expect an earthly reign of Christ, centering in a new Jerusalem that is located on the topographical site of the old; and those who expect no millennium. He considered the former to be orthodox and the latter to be flawed in their faith.¹⁷

The case for millennial orthodoxy was stated in even stronger terms by Irenaeus.¹⁸ All of the data considered, to exclude Polycarp from the ranks of the "orthodox" on this point and to include him in the number of the "flawed in their faith" seems unwise and unwarranted.

2. *Ignatius (died c. A.D. 98/117)*. Our biographical data on Ignatius is meager indeed. In addition to what little can be gleaned from his seven

¹⁴Pol. *Phil.* 5.

¹⁵Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.33.3-4. Cf. Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.

¹⁶J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (rev. ed.; New York: Harper, 1978) 466. Cf. Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 80.

¹⁷M. J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 94.

¹⁸Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.32.1; 5.35.1-2.

epistles, only brief notices survive in other early patristic literature. All agree that he was bishop of Antioch, a contemporary of Polycarp, and devoured by wild beasts in Rome during Trajan's reign (A.D. 98–117). But as for Ignatius' apostolic associations there is considerable controversy and speculation. Peter, Paul and John are all suggested as his apostolic teachers.¹⁹ While Lightfoot takes issue with most of the tradition surrounding Ignatius' apostolic discipleship, he nevertheless contends that even if one supposes a late date for his conversion "there is [no] chronological inconsistency in the supposition that Ignatius was a disciple of some Apostle."²⁰ He avers elsewhere that "his early date and his connexion with Antioch, a chief centre of apostolic activity, render his personal intercourse with Apostles at least probable."²¹

The question of special interest to us here, however, is whether Ignatius was a disciple of John. There is no early evidence to suggest such a relationship. The earliest known reference to a Johannine connection is found in the *Antiochene Acts*, a spurious account of the martyrdom of Ignatius composed probably toward the end of the sixth century. Here in the introductory lines we read of "Ignatius the disciple of the apostle John."²² Geographically, even though the considerable distance between John's home in Ephesus and Ignatius' bishopric of Syrian Antioch would have made the prospect of frequent dialogue very remote in later years, there was certainly no impossibility for the two men to have met at an earlier time in Antioch, Jerusalem, or some other place in Palestine. Even during Ignatius' journey to Rome "to become food for the wild beasts"²³ there is evidence that he tarried in Smyrna with Polycarp for some time, for he wrote four epistles there²⁴ and felt that he had become well acquainted with the bishop of Smyrna.²⁵

The question that naturally begs to be answered at this point: Why, if the option were available, would Ignatius have elected to visit the pupil in Smyrna when a visit to the teacher himself—the sole surviving apostle—would have required only a short journey to the neighboring city of Ephesus? The issue takes on even greater importance if it is assumed that Ignatius was indeed a disciple of the apostle John at an earlier time. For an answer to the question the whole matter of the chronological possibility of a meeting between John and Ignatius must be considered.

¹⁹Lightfoot cites the spurious *Antiochene Acts* (account of Ignatius' martyrdom) and the *Chronicon* of Eusebius as revised by Jerome as the sources of the Johannine association (*Apostolic*, 1. 1.4 and 2. 1.29 respectively). The *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* named Paul as the minister of Ignatius' ordination at Antioch (7. 46). The discipleship under Peter is no doubt a conclusion drawn from that apostle's supposed position as first bishop of the Antiochene church.

²⁰Lightfoot, *Apostolic*, 2. 1.30.

²¹*Ibid.*, 1. 1.4.

²²*Antiochene Acts* 1.

²³*Ign. Rom.* 4 (shorter version).

²⁴While in Smyrna, Ignatius wrote letters to the churches of Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles and Rome (see *Ign. Eph.* 21; *Magn.* 15; *Trall.* 12; *Rom.* 10, both shorter and longer versions for all references).

²⁵*Ign. Pol.* 1 (shorter and longer versions).

In his discussion of the date of Ignatius' death Lightfoot decides, as most have, that "his martyrdom with a high degree of probability be placed within a few years of A.D. 110, before or after." After tentatively placing Ignatius' birth at A.D. 40 (a more conservative date of A.D. 50 is often suggested), Lightfoot naturally concludes, as stated above, that there is no chronological obstacle to an Ignatian discipleship under an apostle. Given the reasonable calculation that both John and Ignatius died during the reign of Trajan and the fact that Ignatius visited Smyrna rather than Ephesus on his way to Rome, it seems necessary to conclude that the apostle preceded the Antiochene bishop in death. This assumption is supported by the fact that Ignatius' epistle to the Ephesian church is addressed to the bishop Onesimus, with no mention of the apostle John. If John had still been living it is inconceivable that he would have been ignored by Ignatius during his journey through Asia Minor and in his correspondence to the Ephesian church.²⁶ If a date closer to the end of Trajan's reign (117) is assigned for Ignatius' martyrdom, John could have been dead for a decade or more before Ignatius' trip to Rome via Asia Minor. In light of the absence of early literary support for a Johannine-Ignatius connection, and after evaluating the geographical and chronological factors, it seems reasonable to conclude that while it is certainly not impossible that the two men at least met it is doubtful either that they met in later years in Asia Minor (after the Apocalypse was composed) or that—assuming an encounter in earlier years—they were intimately associated as teacher and pupil.²⁷

The question remains: Was Ignatius a premillenarian, and if so, from whom did he likely learn the doctrine, if not John specifically or Scripture generally? Ignatius is indeed frequently claimed as a first-century premillennialist. Ryrie cites Peters with approval as assigning Ignatius a place among premillenarians for his references to the "last times" and his belief in imminency.²⁸ In addition to Ignatius' expectation of the "advent of the Redeemer," Taylor cites his belief in the bodily resurrection of the saints as "his blessed

²⁶Throughout his epistles Ignatius deferred to the authority of the apostles. He will not, he said, issue orders as if he were "some great person" (*Eph.* 3, shorter and longer versions) or "an apostle" (*Trall.* 3; *Rom.* 4, shorter and longer versions).

²⁷This conclusion is supported further by the apostolic references found in Ignatius' epistles, if any weight is allowed for the longer versions. In these the bishop of Antioch gives the appearance of having been more deeply indebted to Paul and Peter than any of the other apostles. Four times he links these two apostles' names (*Magn.* 10; *Trall.* 5, 7; in chap. 7 he adds James; *Rom.* 4). Twice he singles Paul out alone for special honor (*Eph.* 12; *Phil.* 7: "Paul and . . . the rest of the apostles"). Of these references, only *Eph.* 12; *Rom.* 4 occur also in the shorter version of the Ignatian epistles. There is but one reference to the apostle John, and this is found only in the longer version of the epistle to the Ephesians. It is interesting, however, as confirming a special relationship between John and the Ephesian church and thereby lending support to the tradition that John lived out the final years of his life at Ephesus. Ignatius expressed the desire that he "be found in the lot of the Christians of Ephesus, who have always had intercourse with the apostles by the power of Jesus Christ, with Paul, and John, and Timothy the most faithful" (*Eph.* 11). Taken as a whole the epistolary evidence here does not reflect a teacher-pupil relationship between John and Ignatius. If Ignatius felt special devotion to any apostle, it would seem to have been Paul first and Peter second.

²⁸C. C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune: Loizeaux, 1953) 21. Cf. G. N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom of Our Lord Jesus, the Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1957), 1. 495.

hope.”²⁹ For Taylor this hope, coupled with the Antiochene bishop’s silence concerning “a temporal millennium or spiritual reign,” and his succession from Peter at Antioch (whose views, according to Taylor, he doubtless shared), is proof enough of Ignatius’ premillennialism.³⁰

In point of fact Ignatius has little to say about eschatological matters. But what is perhaps significant is that his most important pronouncements in this area are made in his correspondence to the apostle John’s disciple Polycarp. He exhorts the Smyrnean bishop to “be watchful, possessing a sleepless spirit.”³¹ Ignatius encourages Polycarp further to “weigh carefully the times” and to “look for Him who is above all time.”³² In the longer version of this last reference the exhortation to watchfulness is preceded by the only pointed reference to “His kingdom” in the Ignatian epistles.

In two other significant eschatological references, one addressed to John’s church at Ephesus and the other to Polycarp’s church at Smyrna, Ignatius reveals his belief that “the last times are come upon us”³³ and that “at the end of the world” Christ will return in corporeal form.³⁴ Even though these statements regarding the end times and the several references to the resurrection throughout his epistles suggest an eschatology more Pauline than Johannine, Ignatius seems nevertheless to have been more prone to discuss such matters with those who had more recently come under the influence of the apostle John than with the recipients of his other correspondence. Who can doubt that, during his stay in Smyrna, Ignatius discussed John’s teachings with Polycarp, the apostle’s most celebrated disciple? Taken as a whole, though the evidence for Ignatius’ premillennialism is not altogether compelling, it is nevertheless consonant with rather than antagonistic toward that doctrine. Furthermore it seems safe to assume that one who was identified as *anēr en tois pasin apostolikos*³⁵ would also have held to this doctrine taught by the apostles and for that reason regarded as an article of orthodoxy by the early Church.

3. *Papias (c. A.D. 60-130/155)*. Papias bishop of Hierapolis was contemporary with Polycarp and Ignatius. Although it is doubtful that he made

²⁹D. T. Taylor, *The Reign of Christ on Earth: Or the Voice of the Church in All Ages, Concerning the Coming and Kingdom of the Redeemer* (Boston: Scriptural Tract Repository, 1882) 54. It is generally assumed that Ignatius’ thirst for martyrdom was a direct result of his resurrection hope. Ignatius wrote: “But when I suffer, I shall be the freedman of Jesus, and shall rise again emancipated in Him” (Ign. Rom. 4, shorter version). “This belief [in Christ’s bodily resurrection] in connection with [Ignatius’] hope of having a part in the first resurrection,” says R. C. Shimeall, “was what led him to despise death and aspire after martyrdom, which was a general characteristic of the Christians of that age” (*Christ’s Second Coming: Is It Pre-Millennial or Post-Millennial?* [New York: Trow and Brinkerhoff, 1865] 63).

³⁰Taylor, *Reign* 54.

³¹Ign. Pol. 1 (shorter and longer versions).

³²Ibid. 3 (shorter version).

³³Eph. 11 (shorter and longer versions).

³⁴Smyrn. 3 (longer version).

³⁵*Antiochene Acts* 1.

contact with Ignatius during his brief visit to Smyrna, it is certainly not impossible. But of Papias' intercourse with Polycarp there can be no reasonable question. Irenaeus pointedly affirmed that Papias was "the hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp."³⁶

The more important question here, however, is not the association with Polycarp but whether Papias was acquainted with the apostle John as Irenaeus suggested. The significance of the question is evident when one considers that Papias has been called the "father of Millenarianism."³⁷ Jean Danielou stresses the importance of Papias' testimony by saying that "the earliest and most conclusive witness to this millenarianism comes from the same Asiatic background as the *Revelation*, namely, Papias . . . who records older traditions going back to Apostolic times."³⁸ Eusebius lamented that "it was due to him that so many of the Church Fathers after him adopted a like opinion [pre-millennialism], urging in their own support the antiquity of the man."³⁹ R. Ludwigson has gone so far as to call Papias "our chief link with the views of the Twelve themselves."⁴⁰

Papias is known to have written a work entitled *Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord* in five books. Jerome also mentions a volume entitled *Second Coming of Our Lord or Millennium* as coming from the hand of Papias.⁴¹ Only fragments of and notices about Papias' works remain, however. These are contained in the works of a number of early Christian writers but chiefly in Irenaeus and Eusebius.

For Papias' own testimony as to his apostolic associations we must trust a fragment preserved only by the antimillenarian Eusebius. He quotes Papias as follows:

But I shall not be unwilling to put down, along with my interpretations, whatsoever instructions I received with care at any time from the elders, and stored up with care in my memory, assuring you at the same time of their truth. . . . If, then, any one who had attended on the elders came, I asked minutely after their sayings,—what Andrew or Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the Lord's disciples: which things Aristion and the presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord, say. For I imagined that what was to be got from books was not so profitable to me as what came from the living and abiding voice.⁴²

As a strident opponent of the millennial doctrine, Eusebius was quick to make the most of Papias' alleged disclaimer to direct apostolic acquaintance

³⁶Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.33.4.

³⁷W. E. Blackstone, *Jesus Is Coming* (Chicago/New York: Revell, 1908) 68.

³⁸J. Danielou, *The Development of Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea*, vol. 1: *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1964) 380.

³⁹Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.13.

⁴⁰R. Ludwigson, *A Survey of Bible Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973) 128.

⁴¹Jerome *Lives of Illustrious Men* 18.

⁴²Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.3-4.

and the double occurrence of the name John. To a so-called presbyter John, rather than the apostle, Eusebius ascribed authorship of the Revelation.⁴³ This was an attempt of course to deny apostolic authority to the book that clearly teaches the thousand-year earthly reign of Christ. It was a popular ploy among the theologians of Alexandria in the third century.

Lightfoot's position on the relationship between Papias and John leads to an unsatisfactory conclusion. He agrees that John lived out the final years of his life at Ephesus and that Polycarp knew him⁴⁴ (as Irenaeus affirmed⁴⁵) and was indeed the apostle's younger contemporary for at least thirty years.⁴⁶ Furthermore he insists that it is almost certain that Polycarp and Papias knew and associated with each other, for they were exact contemporaries, the two most famous teachers in the area, and there was no great distance between their bishoprics.⁴⁷ Yet on the basis of Papias' supposed disclaimer to apostolic association as recounted by Eusebius, Lightfoot firmly denies direct apostolic intercourse to Papias.⁴⁸ How are the data to be evaluated?

Chronologically, if anything, Papias has the edge over Polycarp for acquaintance with John. The date of Papias' birth is variously set at c. A.D. 61 or 70/71.⁴⁹ If the earlier date is accepted, he could have been nearly forty years old at the time of John's death near the end of the first century. At the very least Papias was John's contemporary for the same period that Polycarp was. And it is even possible that he was the apostle's contemporary a full decade longer.⁵⁰

Geographically, Polycarp has only a slight advantage over Papias for a Johannine association. As bishop of Smyrna, some forty-five Roman miles from Ephesus,⁵¹ a visit to the apostle would have called for an approximate two-and-a-half-day journey. The 113-mile distance between Hierapolis and Ephesus,⁵² on the other hand, would have taken some six and a half days to

⁴³Ibid. 3.39.6-7. For a valuable discussion of the authorship of Revelation and early support for the apostle John see J. F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 11-14.

⁴⁴Lightfoot, *Apostolic*, 2. 1.440-441.

⁴⁵Ibid., 1.441; cf. 1. 1.4; Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.3.4.

⁴⁶Lightfoot, *Apostolic*, 2. 1.441.

⁴⁷Ibid. 1.442.

⁴⁸Ibid. 1.4-5.

⁴⁹J. Quasten and J. C. Plumpe, *Ancient Christian Writers* (New York/Ramsey: Newman, 1946), 6. 204.

⁵⁰The question of the date of Papias' conversion to Christianity has bearing here of course, but data for the answer are essentially lacking. The veneration accorded him by the early Church and the tone of the fragmentary references to him suggest a lifetime of commitment to the cause of Christ.

⁵¹Ramsay, *Historical* 164.

⁵²Ibid. 168. Ramsay gives 107 Roman miles as the distance between Laodicea and Ephesus. It is an additional six miles from Hierapolis to Laodicea (see Pfeiffer and Vos, *Wycliffe* 379).

cover. But as Lightfoot himself points out, this was no great distance⁵³ even for those days, and therefore we must agree with the assertion that "it would be a wonder if a man of Papias' inquisitive mind had shut himself up in Hierapolis, instead of availing himself of his many opportunities of meeting men acquainted with the disciples of the Lord! He certainly travelled to Ephesus to meet and be the hearer of St. John."⁵⁴

The literary problem surrounding the Papias-John connection poses a somewhat more difficult obstacle. Irenaeus, as cited previously, says that both Polycarp and Papias were disciples of the apostle John. As a younger contemporary of both men and most likely himself a resident of Smyrna, Irenaeus was in a position to know the facts of the matter.⁵⁵ Eusebius, on the other hand, more than a century removed from these events and no resident of the area (but of Caesarea in Palestine), quotes Papias to the effect that he was a hearer only of those who had personally heard the apostles. He does freely admit, however, that Papias had direct communication with Aristion and the so-called "presbyter John" who are described by Papias as "disciples of the Lord."⁵⁶

More than one commentator has suggested that the proposed two Johns were one and the same.⁵⁷ Schaff concludes the matter by saying that

it is certainly possible that Papias, like his friend Polycarp, may have seen and heard the aged apostle who lived to the close of the first or the beginning of the second century. It is therefore unnecessary to charge Irenaeus with an error either of name or memory. It is more likely that Eusebius misunderstood Papias, and is responsible for a fictitious John, who has introduced so much confusion into the question of the authorship of the Johannean Apocalypse.⁵⁸

When all of the evidence is weighed in the balance it seems that the scales must be tipped in favor of Papias' discipleship under the aged author of the Apocalypse. In view of the geographical, chronological and literary factors

⁵³Lightfoot, *Apostolic*, 2. 1.442. Lightfoot makes this statement with respect to the distance that separated Polycarp and Papias. But if one examines a map of the Roman road system of that day, it becomes immediately apparent that the distance between Hierapolis and Ephesus (113 Roman miles) is some miles shorter than that between Hierapolis and Smyrna (roughly 139 Roman miles). In fact, it is approximately 26 Roman miles or two days' journey shorter. If Lightfoot's reasoning is followed it must be concluded that Papias rejected the shorter journey to see the beloved apostle of our Lord and for the longer excursion to visit the bishop of Smyrna—and this, according to Lightfoot's testimony, would have been a decision made not infrequently.

⁵⁴Quasten and Plumpe, *Ancient*, 6. 109.

⁵⁵See Irenaeus' letter to Florinus as quoted in Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.20.3-8. Here Irenaeus recounted his remembrance of Polycarp and his teachings. The whole tone of the account suggests the long and steady exposure of a youngster to the teachings of the venerable old saint. This could hardly have taken place anywhere other than the place of Polycarp's own bishopric of Smyrna.

⁵⁶Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.5, 7.

⁵⁷See for example Quasten and Plumpe, *Ancient*, 6.108; P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 2. 697-698.

⁵⁸Schaff, *History*, 2. 698.

favoring such an association, the alternative for a man who preferred that which came "from the living and abiding word" to what was handed down in books⁵⁹ is too improbable to entertain with enthusiasm.

4. *Justin Martyr* (c. A.D. 100–165). Without question the most important figure among the early Christian apologists is Justin Martyr. Born in Flavia Neapolis (modern Nablus) in Samaria in A.D. 100, Justin was a trained, professional philosopher. But while walking in a field near the sea one day he met "a certain old man" who convinced him that Platonic philosophy could not compete with the utterances of that ancient class of men called prophets, who "alone both saw and announced the truth to men."⁶⁰

The strong premillennial position found in the *Dialogue with Trypho*⁶¹ but absent in Justin's other works raises some important questions about his communication with other venerable "old men" like Polycarp and Papias. What connection if any did Justin have with Asia Minor? In the account of his conversion Justin spoke of spending periods of time with a sagacious Platonist who had recently settled "in our city."⁶² It was during this time, according to Justin, that he "used to go into a certain field *not far from the sea*."⁶³ On one of these excursions he met the "old man" who introduced him to the OT prophets and to Jesus Christ. Flavia Neapolis and Ephesus are usually suggested as the two most likely candidates for "our city" and the place of Justin's conversion.⁶⁴ But a map of Palestine instantly reveals that Flavia Neapolis (Nablus) is completely landlocked, being an almost equal distance from the Mediterranean Sea, Sea of Galilee and Dead Sea. Ephesus, on the other hand, is only three miles from the Aegean Sea, and its artificial harbor made it in ancient times a principal maritime port. If Ephesus was the place of Justin's conversion his reason for being there, length of stay, etc., are unknown.

Further evidence of Asia Minor's possible influence upon the theology of Justin Martyr is furnished by Eusebius. It is assumed on the strength of his testimony⁶⁵ that Justin's dialogue with Trypho on "the Xystus"⁶⁶ or broad avenue took place in Ephesus. The time of this dialogue seems to have been shortly after the Bar Kosiba rebellion in Palestine.⁶⁷ Thus the extended dis-

⁵⁹Papias as quoted in Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.4.

⁶⁰Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 7. For the full account of this discourse with the old man and the story of Justin's conversion see chaps. 3–8.

⁶¹Ibid. 8.

⁶²Ibid. 2.

⁶³Ibid. 3 (*italics mine*).

⁶⁴J. Quasten, *Patrology* (Westminster: Newman, 1950–1960), 1. 197.

⁶⁵Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 4.18.6.

⁶⁶Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 1 and 9.

⁶⁷Ibid. Here are found references to "the war [lately] waged in Judaea."

cussion with Trypho must have taken place roughly between 138 and 140. If Eusebius was correct, the earliest extant Christian defense of the millenarian doctrine⁶⁸ took place at Ephesus, not far from Patmos where John's revelation was received. Whatever the time or circumstances, if Justin was at Ephesus—and there is ample reason to suppose that he was—at a distance of only forty-one Roman miles from Polycarp's see at Smyrna⁶⁹ (a two-and-a-half-day journey), "a visit to this renowned disciple of the Apostles residing in a neighbouring city," as Lightfoot points out, "would naturally form part of [Justin's] programme."⁷⁰

But whether Justin's program also included the nearly week-long journey to Hierapolis to meet Papias is a different matter depending perhaps upon his total length of stay at Ephesus. The dialogue with Trypho took two days at the end of which Justin was "on the eve of departure, and expect[ing] daily to set sail."⁷¹ Whether he had been in Ephesus for some days, weeks, or even longer before this and thus had had the opportunity to meet Papias, either at Ephesus or Hierapolis, cannot be determined. What is known is that while it was both chronologically and geographically possible for Justin to have visited both Polycarp and Papias, neither man is mentioned by name in his extant writings. But this fact means little when one realizes that out of the whole apostolic band only John and Peter are mentioned by name. In any case, whether Justin made contact with either man or not, a sojourn in Ephesus would have thoroughly exposed him to the teachings of the apostle John and the venerable Asiatic bishops.

5. *Melito of Sardis (second century A.D.)*. The apologist Melito bishop of Sardis—like Smyrna the site of one of the seven churches of Revelation (3:1-6)—flourished during Marcus Aurelius' reign (161-180) and died c. 190. He most probably knew Polycarp⁷² (fifty-four Roman miles between Sardis and Smyrna), perhaps Papias if the Hieraplean bishop lived beyond the mid-second century (eighty-five miles separated Sardis and Hierapolis), and Irenaeus. He certainly would have had frequent communication with his contemporaries, Apollinaris bishop of Hierapolis (c. 175) and Polycrates bishop of Ephesus (c. 190).

Melito is frequently listed as a second-century proponent of premillennialism.⁷³ In keeping with the trend of his place and time he was a prolific writer.

⁶⁸Ibid. 80.

⁶⁹Ramsay, *Historical* 164.

⁷⁰Lightfoot, *Apostolic*, 2. 1.444.

⁷¹Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 142.

⁷²Lightfoot, *Apostolic*, 2. 1.444. Here Lightfoot says of Melito, Apollinaris and Polycrates that they "would all probably have come under his [Polycarp's] personal influence; for they lived at no great distance from Smyrna and must have grown into full manhood, or even attained middle age, before he died."

⁷³See e.g. Taylor, *Reign* 66; Peters, *Theocratic*, 1. 495; J. F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959) 120.

Schaff observes that "there must have been an uncommon literary fertility in Asia Minor after the middle of the second century."⁷⁴ Eusebius lists some twenty works as coming from Melito's hand.⁷⁵ Of these, until the recent discovery of a complete *Homily on the Passion* all that remained of his writings were fragments. We must concur with Schaff in his inclusion in those works the loss of which is "perhaps to be regretted most"⁷⁶ that *On the Apocalypse of John*.

In light of the substantial absence of Melito's writings, the assumption of his premillennial views is usually based on the fact that "Jerome [*Comm. on Ezek.* 36] and Gennadius [*De Dogm. Eccl.* 52] both affirm that he was a *decided millenarian*."⁷⁷ Without direct statements from Melito himself it is unwise to be dogmatic on the subject. But the existing testimony, especially when given by one like Jerome—himself no friend of the millenarians—cannot be minimized. This testimony plus Melito's proximity in time and place to men whose premillennial "orthodoxy" cannot be questioned seems to task with the greater burden of proof those who would deny him the belief.

6. *Apollinaris of Hierapolis* (c. A.D. 175). Apollinaris (or Apollinarius), apologist and bishop of Hierapolis, said Eusebius, "enjoyed great distinction" in his day (along with Melito of Sardis).⁷⁸ As contemporaries serving bishoprics just eighty-five Roman miles apart, all of the associations assumed for Melito above would of course apply to Apollinaris as well. But in addition it should be kept in mind that the sphere of Apollinaris' ecclesiastical responsibility was that which had previously belonged to Papias. Thus we may assume that the influence exerted upon him by his venerated predecessor was unusually strong.

Apollinaris has been claimed by the premillenarian camp,⁷⁹ though direct statements regarding that doctrine, if they existed, are lost with his works.

⁷⁴Schaff, *History*, 2. 737.

⁷⁵Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.

⁷⁶Schaff, *History*, 2. 739. Schaff suggests that the reason Melito's writings "fell into oblivion" was because he was one of the main supporters of Quartodecimanism, a practice later condemned as heretical (2. 737). With regard to the disfavor into which Melito's writings fell, there is an informative note in NPNF. Here it is said that while Melito opposed the teachings of the Montanists he nevertheless held views that were very much in agreement with the spirit of that movement. "To this may be added the fact that Melito was a chiliast," the note continues, "and the teachings of the Montanists brought such disrepute upon chiliast that the fathers of the third and following centuries did not show much fondness for those who held or had held these views. Very few notices of Melito's works are found among the fathers, and none of those works is to-day extant. Eusebius is the first to give us an idea of the number and variety of his writings, and he does little more than mention the titles, a fact to be explained only by his lack of sympathy with Melito's views" (NPNF, 1. 203 n. 1).

⁷⁷Shimeall, *Second Coming* 67. See also Taylor, *Reign* 66; Peters, *Theocratic*, 1. 495; J. F. Silver, *The Lord's Return* (New York: Revell, 1914) 66; W. Chillingworth, *The Works of W. Chillingworth* (12th ed.; London: B. Blake, 1836) 714.

⁷⁸Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.1. Serapion bishop of Antioch (c. 190–211) called him "the most blessed Claudius Apollinarius [variant spelling of Apollinaris], who was made bishop of Hierapolis in Asia" (*Frag.* 1).

⁷⁹See Peters, *Theocratic*, 1. 496; Walvoord, *Millennial* 43, 120.

The writings assigned to him by Eusebius and Jerome include a discourse to Marcus Aurelius, *Against the Greeks* (in five books), two books *On Truth*, and a treatise against the Phrygians (Montanists). Quasten also mentions two books *Against the Jews* and one entitled *On Easter*.⁸⁰ All that remains of these works is a single fragment from an unknown book and two from *On Easter*.

Though the evidence is less than weighty, Apollinaris' residence and ministry in Asia Minor, along with the undoubted Papian influence upon him, present a strong presumption in favor of his premillennialism. Furthermore, once again it is the antimillenarian Jerome who tips the scales in favor of this conclusion. In his chapter on Papias, Jerome explicitly named Apollinaris, among others, as one "who say[s] that after the resurrection the Lord will reign in the flesh with the saints." Jerome indicated that in the formulation of this belief Apollinaris, Irenaeus "and others" "follow [Papias]." ⁸¹

7. *Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202)*. As is generally the case with the fathers, what we know of Irenaeus is sketchy. He was the disciple of Polycarp bishop of Smyrna and appears himself to have been a native of that city. This in effect would make Irenaeus a third-generation teacher and church leader. He was a disciple of a disciple of the apostle John. Of his association with Polycarp, Irenaeus related:

For when I was a boy, I saw thee [Florus] in lower Asia with Polycarp, moving in splendor in the royal court, and endeavoring to gain his approbation. I remember the events of that time more clearly than those of recent years. For what boys learn, growing with their mind, becomes joined with it; so that I am able to describe the very place in which the blessed Polycarp sat as he discoursed, and his goings out and his comings in, and the manner of his life, and his physical appearance, and his discourses to the people, and the accounts which he gave of his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord. And as he remembered their words, and what he heard from them concerning the Lord, and concerning his miracles and his teaching, having received them from eyewitnesses of the "Word of life," Polycarp related all things in harmony with the Scriptures.⁸²

Irenaeus went on to say that as he listened attentively to Polycarp he took note of his words in his heart and then faithfully recalled them through the grace of God.⁸³ These vivid memories "of early youth"⁸⁴ could only have come from one who was a resident of the see of Polycarp's ecclesiastical authority.

⁸⁰Quasten, *Patrology*, 1. 228-229.

⁸¹Jerome *Lives of Illustrious Men* 18.

⁸²Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.20.5-6.

⁸³*Ibid.* 5.20.7.

⁸⁴Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.3.4. Here, speaking of Polycarp, Irenaeus said that him "I also saw in early youth." The introduction to an extract also makes reference to Irenaeus' association with Polycarp. It begins: "For Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons, who was a contemporary of the disciple of the apostle, Polycarp Bishop of Smyrna, and martyr, and for this reason is held in just estimation" (see ANF, 1. 576 n. 5).

It should be noted that, as a resident of the city of Smyrna, Irenaeus would also have had occasion to fall under the influence of Papias, "a companion of Polycarp."⁸⁵

Following Irenaeus' education in Asia Minor under Polycarp and others, at some point (the reason for which is unknown) he set up residence in the Gallican city of Lyons where Pothinus (87-177) was bishop. At the martyrdom of Pothinus in 177,⁸⁶ Irenaeus became bishop of that see. According to later tradition Pothinus also was a product of Asia Minor and had been sent to Gaul by Polycarp.⁸⁷ Perhaps Irenaeus had known Pothinus in Smyrna and had been commissioned by the home church there to assist him in his labors in Lyons. We know from Eusebius that prior to Irenaeus' appointment as bishop he had already served under Pothinus as a presbyter.⁸⁸

The key authority for Irenaeus in his millennial doctrine was the apostle John's teachings as contained in the book of Revelation and related orally and in writing by "the elders who saw John, the disciple of the Lord."⁸⁹ The fact of the unparalleled fertility and "predicted blessing . . . belong[ing] unquestionably to the times of the kingdom, when the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead,"⁹⁰ said Irenaeus, was "borne witness to in writing by Papias, the hearer of John, and a companion of Polycarp."⁹¹ These men (the elders) who testified to these things, Irenaeus stated elsewhere, were those "who saw John face to face."⁹² In view of the fact that Irenaeus regarded the doctrine of the premillennial return of Christ as the orthodox faith of the Church,⁹³ his evaluation of his own mentor's teachings is noteworthy. He said of Polycarp that he "departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true. To these things all the Asiatic Churches testify."⁹⁴

⁸⁵Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.33.4.

⁸⁶For an account of the martyrdom of Pothinus and the persecution of the Christians of Lyons and neighboring Vienne (in modern France), narrated in "The Letter of the Churches of Vienna and Lugdunum to the Churches of Asia and Phrygia," see ANF, 8. 778-784. This account is pieced together from fragments preserved in Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.

⁸⁷The background of this tradition is given by Lightfoot, *Apostolic*, 2. 1.446. Peters states that Pothinus was a premillennialist (chiliast): "His Chiliasm is evident from the churches of Lyons and Vienne, over which he presided, being Chiliastic, from his associate Irenaeus being his successor, who describes the uniformity of faith [Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5. Preface]" (*Theocratic*, 1. 495).

⁸⁸Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.4.2.

⁸⁹Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.33.3.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*

⁹¹*Ibid.* 5.33.4.

⁹²*Ibid.* 5.30.1.

⁹³*Ibid.* 5.32.1; 5.35.1.

⁹⁴*Ibid.* 3.3.4.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the close of the apostolic period there was a settled belief in the early Church that Jesus Christ would soon return to earth to establish the millennial kingdom of a thousand years' duration. Attested to by John the apostle in "the Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants" (Rev 1:1, *NASB*), the doctrine of the premillennial advent of Christ was included among the tenets of early Christian orthodoxy. As a resident teacher in Ephesus in his declining years, John must be reckoned the cause of the uncommon fertility of millenarianism in Asia Minor. His views were championed by his immediate disciples Polycarp and Papias, who in turn influenced the eschatological views of other Church leaders until the Council of Nicea.

The earliest Church fathers—those closest to the apostles and their teaching—unmistakably considered their proclamation of the doctrines of the faith (including premillennialism) to be built upon OT precedent but now resting primarily upon the teachings of Christ, which were authenticated by a distinct NT apostolic sanction. The position is well expressed by Irenaeus: "I have pointed out the truth, and shown the preaching of the Church, which the prophets proclaimed . . . but which Christ brought to perfection, and the apostles have handed down, from whom the Church, receiving [these truths], and throughout all the world alone preserving them in their integrity (*bene*), has transmitted them to her sons."⁹⁵ As a custodian of divine truth Irenaeus was convinced of the trustworthiness of his message, for he had been instructed by men who, like Clement of Rome, "had seen the blessed apostles, and had been conversant with them." Thus it might be said, Irenaeus concluded, that they "have the preaching of the apostles still echoing in [their] ears."⁹⁶

⁹⁵Ibid. 5. preface.

⁹⁶Ibid. 3.3.3.