

The Source of the Corruption of Apostolic Eschatology

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And Trypho to this replied, "... But tell me, do you really admit that this place, Jerusalem, shall be rebuilt; and do you expect your people to be gathered together, and made joyful with Christ and the patriarchs, and the prophets, both the men of our nation, and other proselytes who joined them before your Christ came? ..."

*Then I answered, "... I admitted to you formerly, that I and many others are of this opinion, and that such will take place, as you assuredly are aware; but, on the other hand, I signified to you that many who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise. ... For I choose to follow not men or men's doctrines, but God and the doctrines by Him. ... But I and others, who are right - minded Christians on all points, are assured that **there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged, as the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare.***

AD 150 – Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho (a Jew), chapter lxxx

Controversy over eschatology seems to have emerged quickly after the death of John. Those known to have linkage to the Beloved Disciple held consistently to "chiliasm," the Greek word for "millennialism." Today they would be called "premillennialists" (although they were certainly not "dispensationalists"). In fact, all of the earliest Church Fathers of the first and second centuries, whose eschatology can be discerned with any degree of certainty, were chiliasts.¹ They awaited the restoration of the creation at the coming of Christ, and His reigning over the nations from Jerusalem. The physical body is of this creation, and therefore must be resurrected in order to partake of the new order.

The above quote from Justin Martyr shows that this was not the unanimous opinion of all Christians in the second century. Some Christians held to a heavenly destiny, and rejected the resurrection of the flesh because it was of this present creation. In this article we will attempt to show that this thinking was borrowed from Greek philosophy. Justin indicated that "*right minded Christians on all points*" held to chiliasm with its bodily resurrection. He accused those who disagreed of following "*the doctrines of men.*" We agree with Justin's assessment, both with regard to the fact that many disagreed with his chiliasm, and that the source of their wrong eschatology was the opinions of men, because the rest of the evidence supports his claim.

That chiliasm was the earliest view, the dominant view, and was held by those who had close associations with the Apostles, can be demonstrated from the earliest writings.

Irenaeus also, student of John's disciple, Polycarp,² claimed that the Apostles handed down chiliasm as an eschatological system.³ Another disciple of John's, Papias, who had personal contact with several of the original twelve Apostles, wrote five volumes outlining the Apostolic teaching of chiliasm. This included some of Jesus' oral tradition regarding His coming Kingdom. Irenaeus was familiar with Polycarp's oral teaching of John's eschatology, and with Papias' five books.⁴ It is from Irenaeus that we get the most detailed treatment of the eschatology of the second century Church, since his writings have survived, while those of Papias have only survived in a few fragments quoted by other writers. His witness is the most important because of his access to sources close to the Apostles. Other early chiliasts, who treat eschatology just as extensively, but who did not have this kind of access to original sources, were Justin, Tertullian and Hippolytus.

This raises an important question: If "chiliasm" was indeed what the Apostles handed down, why did Justin indicate that "*many Christians believe otherwise*" only a half century after John's death? The answer to this question is not hard to find.

There was an inherent resistance to the concept of resurrection of the flesh (and a restored creation) within Greek culture. We see this first at Athens when Paul was mocked for proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁵ The concept of a bodily resurrection was later challenged within the Corinthian church,⁶ just a few miles from Athens. Resistance to the concept of resurrection of the flesh and restoration of the physical creation were the direct results of Greek philosophical thinking.

The Greeks typically viewed physical matter as corrupt.⁷ Consequently, the physical substance of man defiles his soul by the close association of the soul with the body.⁸ Salvation, to the Greek mind, involved escaping the matter of the physical creation. Resurrection would not be beneficial, but counterproductive, since the soul would remain trapped within physical substance and continue to be corrupted by it. Likewise, living within a physical creation was corrupting to the soul. For this reason the Greeks of Athens mocked Paul's preaching regarding Jesus' resurrection. The Corinthian church was in danger of abandoning the Apostolic Faith for precisely the same reason. The error of the Corinthians gives us our first glimpse into the corruption of the Apostolic Faith by the intrusion of Greek philosophy. After Paul's martyrdom, the same thinking led to the rise of Gnosticism within the churches, which John had to directly confront in his Epistles and the prologue to his Gospel. When this radical dichotomy between "flesh" (corrupt) and "spirit" (good) led some to propose that "Jesus" the man

was separate from “Christ” a Divine being that descended upon Him at His baptism, John went on the attack, and sought to root it out of the churches. This is the reason for his statements regarding those who do not confess that “Jesus is the Christ.”

In his Dialogue with Trypho (a Jew) quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Justin alluded to “*many who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians,*” yet follow the doctrines of men, denying the resurrection of the flesh, the restoration of the creation, and the believer’s inheritance within it. The doctrines of men, to which Justin referred, were the human theories of the Greek philosophers. While Justin was not willing to denounce these Christians as heretics, because they had not gone to the extremes of Gnosticism regarding the person of Christ, he felt pretty strongly that the Greek philosophical arguments needed to be expunged from Christian theology.

“Considering, therefore, even such arguments as are suited to this world, and finding that, even according to them, it is not impossible that the flesh be regenerated; and seeing that, besides all these proofs, the Savior in the whole Gospel shows that there is salvation for the flesh, why do we any longer endure those unbelieving and dangerous arguments, and fail to see that we are retrograding when we listen to such an argument as this: that the soul is immortal, but the body mortal, and incapable of being revived? For this we used to hear from Pythagoras and Plato, even before we learned the truth.”

Justin, On the Resurrection, X

In Justin’s opinion, Christianity was “retrograding” by entertaining “such arguments as are suited to this world,” those of Pythagoras and Plato. The arguments Justin was here refuting were those of Christians who sought to interpret the Scriptures through the lens of the Greek philosophers.

The Greek mindset resisted the renovation of the creation for the same reason it rejected the resurrection of the body, looking instead for a more mystical inheritance in the heavens, something borrowed from Greek philosophy and paganism. The early orthodox Christian apologists argued for the resurrection of the body as part of a greater scheme to restore the entire Creation at the second coming of Christ.⁹ The body is of this physical creation, and its resurrection in a perfect state was consistent with God’s plan to redeem the earth from the curse, and to dwell among men.

Like Justin, Irenaeus was aware of some otherwise “orthodox” Christians who denied these doctrines, choosing instead to adopt the philosophies of the Greek “heretical discourses.”

“Since, again, some who are reckoned among the orthodox go beyond the pre-arranged plan for the exaltation of the just, and are ignorant of the methods by which they are disciplined beforehand for incorruption, they thus entertain heretical opinions. For the heretics, despising the handiwork of God, and not admitting the salvation of their flesh, while they also treat the promise of God contemptuously, and pass beyond God altogether in the sentiments they form, affirm that immediately upon their death they shall pass above the heavens and the Demiurge, and go to the Mother (Achamoth) or to that Father whom they have feigned. Those persons, therefore, who disallow a resurrection affecting the whole man, and as far as in them lies remove it from the midst [of the Christian scheme], how can they be wondered at, if again they know nothing as to the plan of the resurrection?”

Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book V, xxxi

“Inasmuch, therefore, as the opinions of certain [orthodox persons] are derived from heretical discourses, they are both ignorant of God’s dispensations, and of the mystery of the resurrection of the just, and of the [earthly] kingdom which is the commencement of incorruption, by means of which kingdom those who shall be worthy are accustomed gradually to partake of the divine nature; and it is necessary to tell them respecting those things, that it behooves the righteous first to receive the promise of the inheritance which God promised to the fathers, and to reign in it, when they rise again to behold God in this creation which is renovated, and that the judgment should take place afterwards. For it is just that in that very creation in which they toiled or were afflicted, being proved in every way by suffering, they should receive the reward of their suffering; and that in the creation in which they were slain because of their love to God, in that they should be revived again; and that in the creation in which they endured servitude, in that they should reign. For God is rich in all things, and all things are His. It is fitting, therefore, that the creation itself, being restored to its primeval condition, should without restraint be under the dominion of the righteous; and the apostle has made this plain in the Epistle to the Romans, when he thus speaks: “For the expectation of the creation waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creation has been subjected to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope; since the creation itself shall also be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the sons of God.”

Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book V, xxxii

The linkage between the restoration of the creation, the resurrection of the flesh at Christ’s coming, and Jesus’ own bodily resurrection as the prototype for ours, was viewed by these early orthodox Christians as a consistent and indivisible body of Apostolic truth. The main cause for deviation from this truth was pressure from Greek

philosophy, and its mixture with Christianity as the Gospel spread throughout the Hellenized world.

Modern day amillennialists claim that the “chiliasm” of the early Church was not handed down by the Apostles, but was borrowed from the Jews. While it is true that some of the Jews had a similar eschatology, it is difficult to imagine how it would have so thoroughly permeated the early Greek church unless it was directly taught by the Apostles. A careful reading of the early writers shows that their defense of “chiliasm” and refutations of the “heavenly destiny” concept (which they associated with Gnosticism and Greek philosophy), were based on the literal exposition of Scripture, and not on Jewish tradition. Further, it is clear that the same writers typically held the Jewish interpretations of Scripture in contempt. This is particularly evident in Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho (a Jew), from which we drew our excerpt at the beginning of this chapter. Justin was a converted philosopher, having studied under several schools of Greek philosophy. Yet, coming to Christ, he rejected these philosophies. In his discussion with Trypho, he also repeatedly pointed out the blindness of the Jewish teachers and their interpretations.¹⁰ Having rejected both the Greek philosophies as well as the Jewish misinterpretations of Scripture, how can we account for his strong chiliasm, and that of all the other early Christian apologists, unless it was indeed handed down by the Apostles? The pressure from his former philosophical pursuits would have led him towards amillennial tendencies, which are much more consistent with Greek philosophy. Yet, he argued against such. He also solidly refuted Trypho, a Jew, and explained the errors of the Jewish teachers regarding many Scriptures. It is not logical to suppose that Justin (or any of the other early apologists) would blindly follow a purely Jewish idea without clear Apostolic precedent and support from the Old Testament Scriptures. On the other hand, it is easy to see how an Apostolic “chiliasm” could quickly evolve into proto-amillennialism as Greek believers refused to abandon their own worldview and presuppositions, preferring to view Scripture through a Greek philosophical lens. This is the real cause of the corruption of Apostolic eschatology. And it clearly shows which view was Apostolic, and which was a perversion of the truth.

Notes:

1. There have been many attempts by amillennialists to prove otherwise. However, all such attempts either confuse “chiliasm” with modern dispensationalism, or read into the text more than is warranted. The strongest argument from amillennialists concerns the Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus, chapter X.

*“For God loved men for whose sake He made the world, to whom He subjected all things that are in the earth, to whom He gave reason and mind, whom alone He permitted to look up to heaven, whom He created after His own image, to whom He sent His only begotten Son, **to whom He promised the kingdom which is in heaven, and will give it to those that have loved Him.**”*
(Lightfoot Translation)

The Greek reads, “οἷς τὴν ἐν οὐρανῷ βασιλείαν ἐπηγγείλατο, καὶ δώσει τοῖς ἀγαπήσασιν αὐτόν.”
(<http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/apostfaths/diognetus.html>)

The literal rendering of the phrase in question is, "the kingdom which is in heaven." Whether the writer meant the inheritance of the saints will be "heaven" itself, or "the Kingdom which is in heaven" now will come to earth at the second advent, cannot be ascertained from this epistle. This statement is consistent with chiliasm if we understand that Christ's Kingdom, which is now in heaven, will come to earth in physical manifestation at the second coming, as Jesus instructed us to pray: "Thy Kingdom, come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Historic premillennialists have taught that the Kingdom which is present now in heaven, in the sense that believers are subject to Christ who rules His Church from heaven, will be fully manifest on earth at the second advent, when Jesus will reign over all the nations from Jerusalem. The epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus is consistent with this view. It is therefore not proof of early proto-amillennialism, since these words are consistent with both chiliasm and amillennialism. All other alleged proofs of proto-amillennialism, in the first or second century writers, are equally compatible with historic chiliasm, as held by Justin, Irenaeus, and others.

2. Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book III, iii, 4

3. "The predicted blessing, therefore, belongs unquestionably to the times of the kingdom, when the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead; when also the creation, having been renovated and set free, shall fructify with an abundance of all kinds of food, from the dew of heaven, and from the fertility of the earth: as the elders who saw John, the disciple of the Lord, related that they had heard from him how the Lord used to teach in regard to these times." Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book V, xxxiii, 3

4. Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book V, xxxiii, 4

5. Acts 17:32

6. 1 Corinthians 15:12

7. Gnosticism was the natural outcome of the early blending of Christianity and Greek philosophy. The Gnostics appealed to allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures to deny all of the promises of bodily resurrection, the restoration of the physical Creation, etc.

8. "They who maintain the wrong opinion say that there is no resurrection of the flesh; giving as their reason that it is impossible that what is corrupted and dissolved should be restored to the same as it had been. And besides the impossibility, they say that the salvation of the flesh is disadvantageous; and they abuse the flesh, adducing its infirmities, and declare that it only is the cause of our sins, so that if the flesh, say they, rise again, our infirmities also rise with it." (Justin, On the Resurrection, II)

"But following our order, we must now speak with respect to those who think meanly of the flesh, and say that it is not worthy of the resurrection nor of the heavenly economy, because, first, its substance is earth; and besides, because it is full of all wickedness, so that it forces the soul to sin along with it." (Justin, On the Resurrection, VII)

9. "If therefore the great God showed future things by Daniel, and confirmed them by His Son; and if Christ is the stone which is cut out without hands, who shall destroy temporal kingdoms, and introduce an eternal one, which is the resurrection of the just; as he declares, 'The God of heaven shall raise up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed,' — let those thus confuted come to their senses." (Irenaeus, Book V, ch. xxvi, 2)

10. "I excuse and forgive you, my friend," I said. "For you know not what you say, but have been persuaded by **teachers who do not understand the Scriptures...**" (chapter 9); "Then I answered, "... be not confounded, nay, rather remain still more zealous hearers and investigators, despising **the tradition of your teachers, since they are convicted by the Holy Spirit of inability to perceive the truths taught by God, and of preferring to teach their own doctrines.**" (chapter 38); "**But I am far from putting reliance in your teachers,** who refuse to admit that the interpretation made by the seventy elders who were with Ptolemy [king] of the Egyptians is a correct one; and they attempt to frame another." (chapter 71); "He shall raise all men from the dead, and appoint some to be incorruptible, immortal, and free from sorrow in the everlasting and imperishable kingdom; but shall send others away to the everlasting punishment of fire. **But as to you and your teachers deceiving yourselves when you interpret what the Scripture** says as referring to those of your nation then in dispersion, and maintain that their prayers and sacrifices offered in every place are pure and well-pleasing, learn that **you are speaking falsely,** and trying by all means to cheat yourselves." (chapter 117); "I quoted from the words of Jeremiah the prophet, and Esdras, and David; but from those which are even now admitted by you, which **had your teachers comprehended, be well assured they would have deleted them, as they did those about the death of Isaiah,** whom you sawed asunder with a wooden saw." (chapter 120); "**But they are cisterns broken, and holding no water, which your own teachers have digged,** as the Scripture also expressly asserts, 'teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.' And besides, **they beguile themselves and you,** supposing that the everlasting kingdom will be assuredly given to those of the dispersion who are of Abraham after the flesh, although they be sinners, and faithless, and disobedient towards God, which the Scriptures have proved is not the case." (chapter 140). It seems that the early chiliasts had the same opinion of the Jewish interpretations as Jesus did, "blind guides."