

The Millennial Week & Sabbath Rest

According to the Early Christians

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According to the earliest Christians, the whole time of man's struggle under the curse was confined to six millennia. The seventh millennium, the "Sabbath Rest," was the one thousand year reign of Christ over the nations from Jerusalem. In fact, the term "Chiliasm" (meaning "millennialism") referred to these seven millennia, not just the "Millennium" of Christ's reign over the nations. The Millennial Week eschatology was an inseparable part of early Christian eschatology. In the following quotation from Irenaeus, the essential elements of Chiliasm can be seen tied together:

- the future gathering of Jesus' elect after a brief period of persecution by the Antichrist
- the future hope of the Abrahamic Land inheritance for Christians
- the future millennium, "*the rest, the hallowed seventh day,*" after six millennia of man's struggle under the curse.

This is Chiliasm in a nutshell.

*"But when this Antichrist shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign for three years and six months, and sit in the temple at Jerusalem; and then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending this man and those who follow him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom, that is, **the rest, the hallowed seventh day; and restoring to Abraham the promised inheritance**, in which kingdom the Lord declared, that "many coming from the east and from the west should sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."¹*

One can clearly see in this quotation the connection between Chiliasm's "seventh day" (seventh millennium) and the ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic Land inheritance, which includes the gentiles who have become Abraham's seed through Jesus Christ.

The early Christians believed that the seven-day creation week in Genesis one was an accurate historical record. God created everything in six twenty-four hour days. Yet they also understood the creation week to be prophetic. God's six days of labor and His rest on the Sabbath formed a precedent and pattern for His entire plan of redemption.

¹ Irenaeus, Against Heresies Bk. V, ch. xxx

God would instruct and discipline humanity for six millennia, bringing mankind to completion and perfection in the seventh Millennium.

Man's destiny was to take full dominion over the earth, just as He commanded Adam.² "Then God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth'."³ Yet, because of man's sin and the curse placed on the creation, man is not yet fit to reign over God's creation. As Hebrews says, "For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him."⁴

Christ came to make man fit for his destiny, "leading many sons to glory."⁵ Man will ultimately enjoy God's "rest" in the Millennial Sabbath, when Jesus Christ returns to restore Jerusalem, rule the nations, and rid the earth of its curse at the end of the sixth millennium. The Week of six millennia plus the Sabbath millennium was held by virtually all of the earliest writers who had any connection whatsoever to the Apostles.

Clement of Rome⁶ (AD, 30-100) & **Justin** (AD, 110-165)

*"And the fact that it was not said of the seventh day equally with the other days, 'And there was evening, and there was morning,' is a distinct indication of the consummation which is to take place in it before it is finished, as the fathers declare, especially St. Clement, and Irenaeus, and Justin the martyr and philosopher."*⁷

Papias⁸ (AD. 70-155)

"Taking occasion from Papias of Hierapolis, the illustrious, a disciple of the apostle who leaned on the bosom of Christ, and Clemens, and Pantaenus ... of the Alexandrians, and

² "But He said above, 'Let them increase, and rule over the fishes.' Who then is able to govern the beasts, or the fishes, or the fowls of heaven? For we ought to perceive that to govern implies authority, so that one should command and rule. If, therefore, this does not exist at present, yet still He has promised it to us. When? When we ourselves also have been made perfect [complete] to become heirs of the covenant of the Lord." (Epistle of Barnabas, VI)

³ Gen 1:28

⁴ Heb. 2:8

⁵ Heb. 2:9-10

⁶ Clement of Rome knew the Apostle Paul, being called by him a "fellow worker" in Phil. 4:3 (Eusebius, History, Book III, ch. iv)

⁷ Justin, Frag. XV, Comments by Anastasius about Clement, Irenaeus, and Justin

⁸ Papias was one of the Apostle John's students. He was a bishop in the church at Hierapolis while John lived at Ephesus (just a few miles to the north) after his release from Patmos. Papias also had personal contact with others who had heard Jesus teach. He wrote a great deal about Chiliasm. Unfortunately, all of his original works are lost. All that remains are references to him and quotations from his works by later writers.

the wise Ammonius, the ancient and first expositors [of Scripture], who agreed with each other, who understood the work of the six days as referring to Christ and the whole Church.”⁹

Barnabas¹⁰ (AD. 100?)

”And God made in six days the works of His hands, and made an end on the seventh day, and rested on it, and sanctified it.’ Attend, my children, to the meaning of this expression, ‘He finished in six days.’ This implieth that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with Him a thousand years. And He Himself testifieth, saying, ‘Behold, today will be as a thousand years.’ Therefore, my children, in six days, that is, in six thousand years, all things will be finished. ‘And He rested on the seventh day.’ This meaneth: when His Son, coming [again], shall destroy the time of the wicked man, and judge the ungodly, and change the-sun, and the moon, and the stars, then shall He truly rest on the seventh day.”¹¹

Irenaeus¹² (AD. 120-202)

”[He gives this] as a summing up of the whole of that apostasy which has taken place during six thousand years.¹³ ”For in as many days as this world was made, in so many thousand years shall it be concluded. And for this reason the Scripture says: ‘Thus the heaven and the earth were finished, and all their adornment. And God brought to a conclusion upon the sixth day the works that He had made; and God rested upon the seventh day from all His works.’ This is an account of the things formerly created, as also

⁹ Fragments of Papias, IX

¹⁰ Early Christian writers attributed this Epistle to Barnabas, Paul’s companion (see: Tertullian, On Modesty, ch. xx; Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, Bk II, ch. xx). It was held in extremely high regard, so much so, that it was included along with the inspired New Testament books in some early Christian copies of the Scriptures (e.g. Codex Sinaiticus). In general, the book seems to have been written to counter the Judaizing tendencies by Jewish Christians. One striking feature of this epistle is its clear dependence on the book of Hebrews, using very similar arguments and terminology. As we will demonstrate in later chapters, Chiliasm itself was rooted largely in the teaching of the 4th chapter of Hebrews.

¹¹ Epistle of Barnabas, XV

¹² Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp, who was a student of John. Polycarp was bishop of the Church in Smyrna, most likely when Jesus dictated the letter to Smyrna contained in Rev. 2. Jesus had no criticism, only praise for the faithfulness of this church. His prophetic exhortation to this church, “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. ... Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life,” (Rev. 2:10) was certainly heeded by Polycarp. He stood boldly and confidently on the pyre, without being bound to the stake, while he was burned to death for his faithfulness to Christ. His pupil, Irenaeus, carried on his master’s teachings and included some of them in his own works. Irenaeus also died for his faith along with many of the members of the church he pastored in Lyons, Gaul.

¹³ The 6,000 years are counted from the fall of man, when the curse was put into force, and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden.

*it is a prophecy of what is to come. For the day of the Lord is as a thousand years; and in six days created things were completed: it is evident, therefore, that they will come to an end at the sixth thousandth year ... the whole apostasy of six thousand years, and unrighteousness, and wickedness, and false prophecy, and deception; for which things' sake a cataclysm of fire shall also come [upon the earth]."*¹⁴

*"These are [to take place] in the times of the kingdom, that is, upon the seventh day, which has been sanctified, in which God rested from all the works which He created, which is the true Sabbath of the righteous, which they shall not be engaged in any earthly occupation; but shall have a table at hand prepared for them by God, supplying them with all sorts of dishes."*¹⁵

Hippolytus:¹⁶ (AD. 170-236)

*"And six thousand years must needs be accomplished, in order that the Sabbath may come, the rest, the holy day on which God rested from all His works. For the Sabbath is the type and emblem of the future kingdom of the saints, when they shall reign with Christ, when He comes from heaven, as John says in his Apocalypse. 'For a day with the Lord is as a thousand years.' Since, then, in six days God made all things, it follows that six thousand years must be fulfilled."*¹⁷

Commodianus:¹⁸ (AD. 240)

*"Adam was the first who fell, and that he might shun the precepts of God, Belial was his tempter by the lust of the palm tree. And he conferred on us also what he did, whether of good or of evil, as being the chief of all that was born from him; and thence we die by his means, as he himself, receding from the divine, became an outcast from the Word. We shall be immortal when six thousand years are accomplished."*¹⁹

"This has pleased Christ, that the dead should rise again, yea, with their bodies; and those, too, whom in this world the fire has burned [martyrs], when six thousand years are completed,... Those who are more worthy, and who are begotten of an illustrious stem,

¹⁴ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. V, xxviii

¹⁵ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. V, xxxiii

¹⁶ Hippolytus was a student of Irenaeus, who was a student of Polycarp, who was a student of John. He was a presbyter and possibly bishop of the church in Rome. He was martyred about AD 236.

¹⁷ Hippolytus. On the Hexaëmeron, Or Six Days' Work, Fragments from Commentaries on Various Books of Scripture

¹⁸ Commodianus was a bishop of a church in North Africa.

¹⁹ Commodianus, Christian Discipline, xxxv

*and the men of nobility under the conquered Antichrist, according to God's command living again in the world for a thousand years, ... They who make God of no account when the thousandth year is finished shall perish by fire, ..."*²⁰

Cyprian:²¹ (AD. 200-258)

"It is an ancient adversary and an old enemy with whom we wage our battle: six thousand years are now nearly completed since the devil first attacked man.²² All kinds of temptation, and arts, and snares for his overthrow, he has learned by the very practice of long years. If he finds Christ's soldier unprepared, if unskilled, if not careful and watching with his whole heart; he circumvents him if ignorant, he deceives him incautious, he cheats him inexperienced. But if a man, keeping the Lord's precepts, and bravely adhering to Christ, stands against him, he must needs be conquered, because Christ, whom that man confesses, is unconquered."²³

Methodius:²⁴ (AD. 260-312)

"For since in six days God made the heaven and the earth, and finished the whole world, and rested on the seventh day from all His works which He had made, and blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, so by a figure in the seventh month, when the fruits of the earth have been gathered in, we are commanded to keep the feast to the Lord, which signifies that, when this world shall be concluded in the seventh thousand years, when God shall have completed the world, He shall rejoice in us. ... Then, when the appointed times shall have been accomplished, and God shall have ceased to form this creation, in the seventh month, the great resurrection-day, it is commanded that the Feast of our Tabernacles shall be celebrated to the Lord,²⁵ of which the things said in Leviticus are symbols and figures."²⁶

²⁰ Commodianus, Instructions of Commodianus, lxxx

²¹ Cyprian was bishop of Carthage (N. Africa), and was martyred for his faith in AD 258.

²² A few writers spoke of the 6,000 years as being nearly complete in their day. These writers thought that the Antichrist was about to appear, after which Christ would return. (Other writers, such as Irenaeus and Hippolytus, expected a considerable delay before Antichrist would appear). The error was based on their use of the Septuagint's erroneous ages of the patriarchs in the Genesis genealogies. The LXX has been systematically altered, adding 100 years per generation to most of the people mentioned when they had their child. The use of such calculations necessarily placed the end of the 6,000 years within a hundred or so years of some of the later writers.

²³ Cyprian, Treatise xi

²⁴ Methodius was a bishop of the churches of Olympus and Patara in Lycia (Turkey), and was martyred for the Faith in AD 312. He was an outspoken opponent and critic of Origen. The philosophical speculations and allegorical approach to Scripture made popular by Origen eventually led to the decline and eventual extinction of Chiliasm in Christianity.

²⁵ Feast of Tabernacles (see Zech. 14:16-21)

²⁶ Methodius, Discourse IX, ch. i

“For I also, taking my journey, and going forth from the Egypt of this life, ... celebrate with Christ the millennium of rest, which is called the seventh day, even the true Sabbath.”²⁷

Lactantius:²⁸ (AD. 260-330)

“Therefore let the philosophers, who enumerate thousands of ages from the beginning of the world, know that the six thousandth year is not yet completed, and that when this number is completed the consummation must take place, and the condition of human affairs be remodeled for the better ... Therefore, since all the works of God were completed in six days, the world must continue in its present state through six ages, that is, six thousand years. ... And again, since God, having finished His works, rested the seventh day and blessed it, at the end of the six thousandth year all wickedness must be abolished from the earth, and righteousness reign for a thousand years; and there must be tranquility and rest from the labors which the world now has long endured. ... “For six thousand years have not yet been completed, and when this number shall be made up, then at length all evil will be taken away, that justice alone may reign.”²⁹

Victorinus: (AD. 300?)

“And in Matthew we read, that it is written Isaiah also and the rest of his colleagues broke the Sabbath — that that true and just Sabbath should be observed in the seventh millenary of years. Wherefore to those seven days the Lord attributed to each a thousand years; for thus went the warning: “In Thine eyes, O Lord, a thousand years are as one day.” Therefore in the eyes of the Lord each thousand of years is ordained, for I find that the Lord’s eyes are seven. Wherefore, as I have narrated, that true Sabbath will be in the seventh millenary of years, when Christ with His elect shall reign.”³⁰

“So great a cloud of witnesses” have testified to the eschatology handed down by the Apostles of Jesus Christ. They include all of the early writers who were instructed by the Apostles or by those who knew them personally. They include faithful martyrs of

²⁷ Methodius, Discourse IX, ch. v

²⁸ Lactantius *“boldly confessed the Faith amid the fires of the last and most terrible of the great persecutions”* (editor of his works). Justin had written to the Roman Emperor in his day, defending Christianity and overthrowing the pagan gods of the Empire. Lactantius followed in Justin’s footsteps, writing to instruct the Emperor Constantine himself in the Christian Faith. He was a Christian teacher of great renown, being charged with the personal instruction of the Emperor Constantine’s son, Crispus.

²⁹ Lactantius, The Epitome of the Divine Institutes, LXX

³⁰ Victorinus, On the Creation of the World

the early Church, paying for their faithfulness with their own blood. And they include the earliest shepherds of the local churches, to whom the true apostolic Faith had been entrusted. These men all believed and taught the same thing – Chiliasm.

The question that begs to be asked is, why? Where did Chiliasm originate? The proverbial elephant in the room is that Chiliasm was taught by the Apostles, just as Irenaeus indicated, “*the presbyters, the disciples of the Apostles*” repeated what they had heard from the Apostles.³¹ Chiliasm was and is a part of “*the Faith once for all delivered to the saints.*” These early witnesses spoke in unison in testimony to this fact.

³¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Bk. V, ch. xxxvi