

## **THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES AND THE MILLENNIUM IN HISTORY**

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As a member of God's Church you are already familiar with the biblical passages concerning God's millennial Kingdom. However, you may not be aware of the many commentaries about the Millennium and the Feast of Tabernacles found in extrabiblical writings from both the Jews and early Christian fathers.

In the long centuries between the Old and New Testaments, Jewish writings often described God's Kingdom on earth. Similarly, the early Christian church fathers frequently mention a 1,000-year rule of Christ on this physical planet. Belief in the Millennium was almost universal, even among Catholics.

### **The record of Papias**

One of the earliest figures we know of outside the New Testament was Papias. He was said to have been an elder in the church at Hierapolis in Asia Minor and to have known the apostle John. Not long after the book of Revelation was written, Papias, one of the early church fathers, attempted to collect all the sayings attributed to Jesus and put them in a five-volume work. One of these alleged sayings is this:

"The days will come when vineyards shall grow each with ten thousand vines, and on one vine ten thousand branches, and on one branch ten thousand shoots, and on every shoot ten thousand clusters, and in every cluster ten thousand grapes, and every grape when pressed will give twenty-five measures of wine; and when one of the saints grasps a cluster, another cluster will cry out: 'I am better, take me, bless the Lord on my account.' "

This saying is not from Jesus, contrary to what Papias thought, but shows a current belief. Actually, the belief in God's Kingdom on earth had been expressed in Jewish literature long before the time of Papias. One writing, which probably dates before 200 B.C., states:

"And in those days the whole earth will be tilled in righteousness, and all of it will be planted with trees, and it will be filled with blessing. And all pleasant trees they will plant on it, and they will plant on it vines, and the vine which is planted on it will produce fruit in abundance; and every seed which is sown on it, each measure will produce a thousand, and each measure of olives will produce ten baths of oil" (Eth. En. 10:18-19).

## **Jewish beliefs**

The tradition of the coming Kingdom of God on earth was strong in Jewish literature before and during the first century A.D. One Jewish writing, which dates from about 150 B.C., is essentially a paraphrase of Genesis but has a small section on the coming Kingdom:

"And in those days the children will begin to study the laws, and to seek the commandments, and to return to the path of righteousness. And the days will begin to grow many and increase among those children of men, till their days draw nigh to one thousand years, and to a greater number of years than before was the number of the days. And there will be no old man nor one who is not satisfied with his days, for all will be as children and youths. And all their days they will complete and live in peace and in joy, and there will be no Satan nor any evil destroyer" (Jub. 23:26-29).

Not surprisingly, these Jewish works often use language reminiscent of the Old Testament. But some of them were written to be read by the pagan Greeks and Romans and often took on the language of the Hellenistic oracles, since this commanded more attention. Yet even then, we still find reflections of the biblical statements. From about the middle of the second century B.C. we read:

"For Earth the universal mother shall give to mortals her best fruit in countless store of corn, wine and oil. Yea, from heaven shall come a sweet draught of luscious honey, the trees shall yield their proper fruits, and rich flocks...And the cities shall be full of good things and the fields rich: neither shall there be any sword throughout the land nor battle din: nor shall the earth be convulsed any more with deep-drawn groans" (3 Sib. Orac. 744-52).

The Jewish people as a whole did not accept Jesus as the promised Messiah. But even after the disastrous war with Rome in 66-70, many continued to hope in a messiah who would usher in God's Kingdom.

About A.D. 100 one writer envisioned a messiah who would bring an age of peace but then be killed, after which God would cause the resurrection and final judgment (Apoc. Ezra 7:26-44). Another writing shortly after this, however, is closer to biblical teachings:

"And it shall come to pass when all is accomplished that was to come to pass in those parts, that the Messiah shall then begin to be revealed...The earth also shall yield its fruit ten thousandfold....And those who have hungered shall rejoice: moreover, also, they shall behold marvels every day. For winds shall go forth from before me to bring every morning the fragrance of aromatic fruits, and at the close of the day clouds distilling the dew of health... And it shall come to pass

after these things, when the time of the advent of the Messiah is fulfilled, that He shall return in glory. Then all who have fallen asleep in hope of Him shall rise again" (Apoc. Bar. 29-30).

### **The Catholic view**

Justin Martyr, a Catholic, referred to many Catholic beliefs, such as worship on Sunday, when he wrote about A.D. 150. Yet Justin held a strong belief in the Millennium. In his Dialogue with Trypho 80, he writes:

"If you have ever encountered any so-called Christians who do not admit this doctrine [of the Millennium], but dare to blaspheme the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob by asserting that there is no resurrection of the dead, but that their souls are taken up to heaven at the very moment of their death, do not consider them to be real Christians... But I and every other completely orthodox Christian feel certain that there will be a resurrection of the flesh, followed by a thousand years in the rebuilt, embellished, and enlarged city of Jerusalem, as was announced by the prophets Ezechiel, Isaiah, and the others."

Toward the end of the second century, Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, also wrote on the subject. In his youth, he had heard Polycarp preach. In his work, Against All Heresies, he refers to the Millennium in a number of passages. He writes, "For in as many days as this world was made, in so many thousand years shall it be concluded" (5.28.3). After citing various prophecies about the Kingdom on earth (5.34.1-4), he notes that these prophecies are to be taken literally (5.35.1).

Hippolytus of Rome, in the early third century, wrote a commentary on the book of Daniel. Like so many others, he believed God would intervene after 6,000 years of human history: "And 6,000 years must needs be accomplished, in order that the Sabbath may come...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" (4.23).

In the late third century, Victorinus of Pannonia wrote a commentary on Revelation in which he shows his acceptance of the Millennium. Elsewhere he similarly writes, "Wherefore, as I have narrated, that true Sabbath will be in the seventh millenary of years, when Christ with his elect shall reign" (Defab. mun.).

### **Anti-Millennium concepts**

Belief in the Millennium was practically universal in the second century, though some did not accept it. But by the early third century, opposition had begun to mount.

The archheretic Marcion of the second century rejected any literal interpretation of Revelation 20 (Tertullian, C Marc. 3.24). In the third century the widely influential Origen of Alexandria castigated the idea of a rule of Christ and the saints on a physical earth (De princ. 2.11.2).

By the fourth century, belief in the Millennium was more criticized than accepted. Granted, such writers as Victorinus still believed it. But church historian Eusebius wrote against millennial teachings and presented millenarians such as Papias in a poor light in his ecclesiastical history.

By the end of the fourth century, the Millennium had become a mere vestige in the Catholic church. Jerome even made a new edition of Victorinus' commentary on Revelation, in which he edited out all millennial teachings! Augustine, who set the standard of Catholic thought for centuries, wrote in his City of God 20.7.1:

"But, as they assert that those who then rise again shall enjoy the leisure of immoderate carnal banquets, furnished with an amount of meat and drink such as not only to shock the feeling of the temperate, but even to surpass the measure of credulity itself, such assertions can be believed only by the carnal."

### **Tabernacles a type**

Jerome heaped scorn on those who looked forward to 1,000 years on earth and called them Judaizers. But he also noted that the Jews celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles as a type of the 1,000-year Messianic Kingdom. In a comment on Zechariah 14, he writes (Comm. in Zach. 625-31):

"He says, all who are left of the nations who came against Jerusalem will come up once a year to worship the King, the Lord of Hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. The Jews look forward to these things also with a vain future hope in a reign of 1,000 years, of which the celebration is itself a beginning."

But perhaps the most telling explanation of the Feast of Tabernacles is that of Methodius, who died A.D. 311. He points out that plant products used to build the booths symbolize the resurrection and the celebration of the spiritual Feast in the Millennium (236). The fact that the Feast is in the seventh month represents the great day of the resurrection (238). Later he comments:

"For they only who have celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles come to the Holy Land, setting out from those dwellings which are called tabernacles, until they come to enter into the temple and city of God, advancing to a greater and more glorious joy, as the Jewish types indicate...For I also, taking my journey and going forth from the Egypt of this life, came first to the resurrection which is the true Feast of Tabernacles, and there having set up my tabernacle, adorned with

the fruits of virtue, on the first day of the resurrection, which is the day of judgment, celebrate with Christ the Millennium of rest, which is called the seventh day, even the true Sabbath" (253-4).

Methodius was a Catholic and certainly did not keep the Feast. Nevertheless, he recognized, albeit confusedly, that there is basic spiritual significance to the Festival.

How much more we who have God's Spirit and hear the Words of God! God's Church knows the purpose and deep spiritual meaning of the Feast. As we keep it, we look forward to the time God Himself in the person of Jesus Christ will rule over the earth.