



## The Early Church Millennialists

### Review

In the last chapter, I made the case that the 1,000-year messianic kingdom has a stealthy quality about it. This is because much of the information about Christ's earthly kingdom is found in obscure and complex books of the Bible, such as Daniel and Revelation.

The messianic kingdom described by the prophets will be an earthly kingdom with all nations subservient to the Jewish Messiah. The Romans were understandably hypersensitive to any talk of a Jewish Messiah. Any proclamation of this coming kingdom by Jewish missionaries like Paul would have surely caused the Roman authorities to react violently against them and against those who followed their teachings. These were dangerous times to be speaking and writing about an earthly messianic kingdom in which Christ would rule the world as King of kings and Lord of lords. Therefore, the apostles wisely focused on the eternal kingdom of heaven, which did not pose a geopolitical threat to the Romans.

If Roman authorities had obtained a copy of the book of Revelation, they probably would have read a small portion and thrown the book down in exasperation, unable to comprehend it! But in the book of Revelation, God provides his saints a window into the Old Testament, which contains an extensive description of the messianic kingdom on this earth.

## The Early Church Fathers

The apostles' strategy of avoiding the subject of Christ's earthly kingdom and emphasizing the heavenly kingdom paid off. Despite periodic episodes of severe persecution, the church grew rapidly, extending into all socioeconomic levels of Roman society. The church leadership also shifted to Gentile believers, who were in a much better position to read the book of Revelation and openly discuss the existence of a future messianic kingdom. These Gentile Christians were not Jewish missionaries and were loyal Roman citizens. Most of the early church fathers were writing after the Second Jewish-Roman War when Israel was dissolved as a nation. The Romans would be hard-pressed to accuse these Gentile leaders of leading a Jewish insurrection, since the nation of Israel no longer existed.

These Gentile Christian leaders began to decipher the book of Revelation and to connect it to other scriptures. They linked Christ's reference to a hundredfold reward in this age, when he sits on his throne and rules the world, to the millennial reign of Christ described by John. They linked Christ's reference to the disciples sitting on twelve thrones, judging Israel during Christ's reign, to the thrones that will rule the nations in the millennium. As a result, a significant number of well-respected early church fathers became millennialists.

Scholars use the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325 in dating the church fathers. The church fathers who lived before the First Council of Nicaea are referred to as ante-Nicene fathers. Those who lived after the First Council of Nicaea are referred to as post-Nicene fathers. Irenaeus (AD 120–202) is an ante-Nicene father, for he lived before AD 325, whereas Augustine (AD 354–430) is a post-Nicene father. In my opinion, when it comes to the correct interpretation of the millennium, the teachings of the ante-Nicene millennialists are more important than those of Augustine because they lived closer to the time of the apostles and had access to their oral testimonies.

### Papias (c. AD 60–130)

The early church historians indicate that those closest to John developed a robust form of millennialism. Papias is an early church father who was one of John's disciples. Papias was so intrigued by John's description

of Christ's millennial reign that he wrote a book on the subject. Papias gathered material from John's oral testimony and other knowledgeable sources for his book. This is like the way Luke gathered oral testimonies from those who knew Christ to write his gospel. Papias's book had a profound impact on other church fathers, such as Irenaeus, who lived not long after him. Unfortunately, Papias's book was lost in antiquity, and we only have fragments of his writings. But we do have written testimonies about his book by other church fathers.

Historian Brian E. Daley describes Papias's endeavor to write about the millennium in the book *The Hope of the Early Church*:

Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia in the early second century, apparently also had had close contact with the community in which the Johannine writings were produced. He is known to have collected material about Jesus and his disciples from oral sources, and to have arranged it in five books entitled Explanations of the Words of the Lord. According to Irenaeus (AH 5.33.3-4), book 4 of Papias' collection contained, among teachings attributed to Jesus, a vivid description of a coming millennial kingdom, in which the fruitfulness of the earth will be increased to staggering proportions for the sake of the risen saints. Papias' authority became the basis of Irenaeus' own millennial expectations at the end of the second century.<sup>14</sup>

The apostle John had spent several years listening to Christ's teachings. Like an investigative journalist, Papias probably peppered John with questions regarding the millennium. He could ask John about other things that Christ had taught him about the future millennial kingdom when the risen saints will experience the incredible "fruitfulness of the earth." Revelation only contains one short paragraph describing the millennium, but with his access to the oral history of Jesus' teachings from the apostle John, Papias was able write an entire book vividly describing the millennium. This indicates that the twelve apostles were exposed to much more information about the earthly kingdom of Christ than what is revealed in the Gospels. But for the

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<sup>14</sup> Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 18.

reasons noted in the previous chapter, the Holy Spirit probably had the Gospel writers downplay Christ's earthly kingdom and remain focused on the eternal heavenly kingdom.

We read modern commentaries on the book of Revelation by biblical scholars who inform us what *they think* John meant by the "first resurrection." But Papias could ask John in person about his opinion of the nature of this resurrection. It is a fair assumption, therefore, that Papias's views on these subjects would be close to what John believed. His direct access to the apostle John gives Papias's teachings great credibility when he expounds on the meaning of the millennium. We should pay close attention to how Papias and these early millennialists understood Christ's millennial reign.

Scholars cannot agree on what percentage of the ante-Nicene fathers were millennialists. But they do agree that a significant and highly respected number of them did believe in a literal millennium. And we have a sufficient collection of their writings to be able to understand their views on the subject.

### **Early Millennialism versus Modern Premillennialism**

Because of the inherent credibility of the teachings of the ante-Nicene millennialists, premillennialists often lend support to their eschatology by referencing what they taught. Modern premillennialists believe Christ physically returns to the earth at the beginning of the millennium to establish his 1,000-year messianic kingdom. They also believe the first resurrection at the beginning of the millennium represents the saints in their raptured eternal bodies that are no longer given in marriage. Only human survivors of the Tribulation remain in their natural bodies and continue to experience marriage and reproduction. The raptured saints in their glorified bodies comingle with natural human beings during the millennium.

Like modern premillennialists, these early millennialists believed that Christ physically returns to this earth at the beginning of the millennium to establish his kingdom. Regarding the first resurrection at the beginning of the millennium, however, they did *not* believe it would be of raptured, glorified bodies. Rather, they believed the first resurrection in conjunction with Christ's return would be of natural bodies, which would experience marriage and procreation. The early millennialists placed the

rapture *after* the millennium at the final resurrection, when the glorified saints inherit the Father's eternal new heavens and new earth.

The early millennialists' view of the two resurrections can be outlined as follows:

- The **first resurrection** will be of the natural bodies of the departed saints to inherit the restored natural earth during Christ's reign.
- The **final resurrection** after the millennium will be of the raptured or eternal bodies of the saints to inherit the Father's eternal new heavens and new earth.

We will be resurrected into natural bodies for a restored natural earth and into eternal bodies for an eternal new earth.

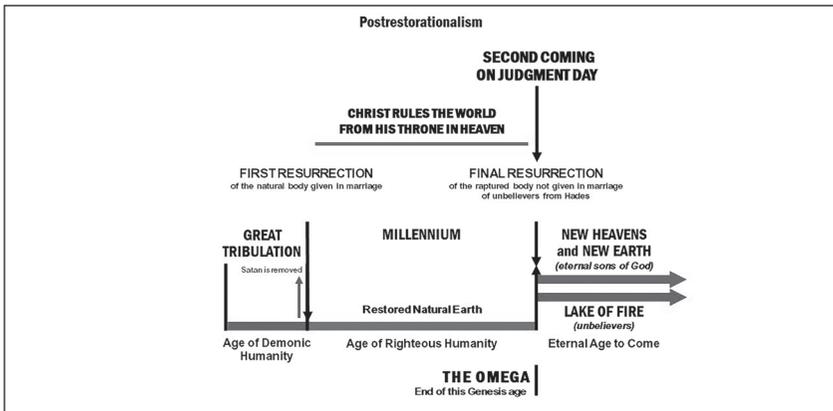
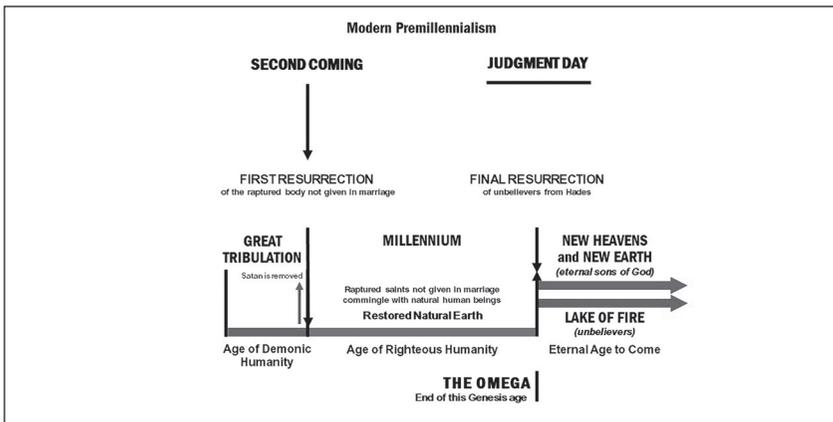
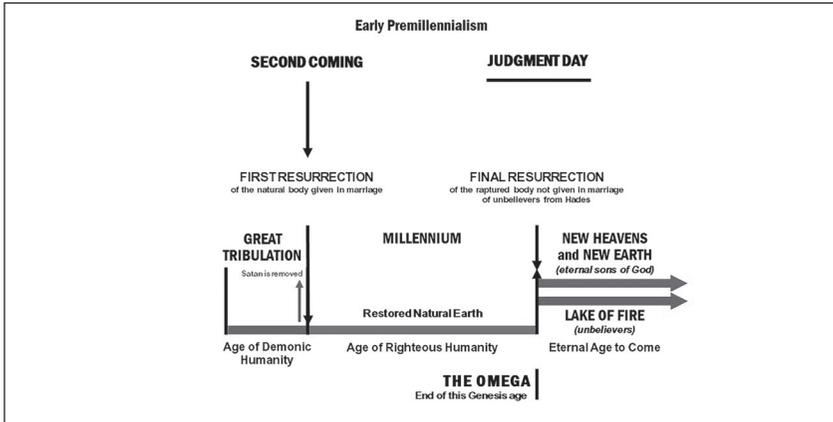
When I first formulated the view of postrestorationism, I extensively researched the millennial views of the early church fathers. I was very encouraged when I discovered that they had the same understanding of the nature of the two resurrections as I do. The only real difference between their view of God's endgame and the one presented in this book is that I believe the Scriptures teach that Christ rules the world during the millennium from his throne in heaven, where he already has all the authority and power necessary to establish his earthly kingdom. His second coming *and* the rapture would be after the millennium at the end of the world, when he takes the raptured saints to his Father's heavenly kingdom. Christ, as the all-powerful Son of God, through whom and for whom this Genesis creation was made, does not need to physically return to this earth to rule over his own creation.

As I read their writings, I noticed that when they assume Christ's second coming is at the beginning of the millennium, they do not reference any oral history from the apostles to support this claim. Nor do they offer any biblical justification for this teaching. On the other hand, when they teach about the nature of the two resurrections, they do support these teachings with oral history as well as the Scriptures.

The early millennialists made one critical mistake. They placed the second coming at the beginning of the millennium instead of on the last day. Other than the misplaced second coming, I discovered that postrestorationism is remarkably like the historical teachings of these early millennialists. I am convinced that if they had not made this mistake, this view of God's endgame would have been the orthodox

teaching for the last two thousand years and we never would have heard of premillennialism or amillennialism.

The following charts compare these three views.



Some theologians have accused me of introducing a new doctrine on eschatology. Theologians are usually apprehensive of new doctrines because they are often harbingers of a new heresy. The historical teachings of the church are given great weight. My view of God's endgame, however, is not really new. It is a revival of the millennialism of the early church. It is a rediscovered and slightly modified version of their teachings. In fact, as this chapter will demonstrate, postrestorationism is closer to the views of the early millennialists than any modern form of premillennialism, which gives this view of God's endgame great historic credibility.

### **The Two Resurrections**

The key to understanding the eschatology of the early millennialists is understanding their view of the nature of the first and final resurrections, so let's look at their teachings relative to the nature of these two resurrections. The Scriptures define two kinds of resurrected bodies—the natural body, which experiences marriage, and the immortal body, which does not experience marriage. Lazarus was resurrected into his natural body, whereas Jesus was resurrected into his immortal body.

There are two ways to determine how the early millennialists understood the first and final resurrections:

1. Study which Scriptures they link to these two resurrections
2. Study when they describe the resurrected saints as experiencing marriage, and when they describe them as not experiencing marriage

The early millennialists linked the first resurrection to Ezekiel 37 and the valley of dry bones. Ezekiel experienced a graphic vision of the resurrection of the natural, Adamic bodies of the departed Jewish saints, reconstituted with bones, muscles, tendons, and skin. The saints are given the breath of life in the manner of the creation of Adam and Eve and experience marriage and reproduction as they dwell in the restored nation of Israel on the restored Edenic earth.

The early millennialists also understood that Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the prophets envisioned the messianic kingdom on this earth as an age of righteous humanity with resurrected humans living with houses, land, and extended human families on a restored natural earth. They

linked these prophecies to Jesus' promise of a hundredfold reward in this age when he regenerates the earth to its Edenic condition.

Modern theologians typically interpret Ezekiel 37 metaphorically. But unlike modern theologians, the ante-Nicene millennialists interpreted Ezekiel literally. They believed that to inherit an Adamic paradise on a restored Edenic earth in this age, the saints must come back to life in their natural bodies. And to inherit an eternal kingdom in the age to come, the saints will need eternal bodies.

The early millennialists linked the final resurrection to Christ's description of the immortal bodies of the sons of God in his answer to the Sadducees:

The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage [natural human beings in this Genesis age], but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age [believers] and to the resurrection from the dead [on the last day] neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore [immortal bodies], because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection [destined for the eternal age to come]. (Luke 20:34–36)

In the resurrection of the sons of God in the eternal kingdom, we will no longer experience the Adamic function of marriage. Our mortal or natural Adamic bodies will be transformed into immortal bodies. Our existence in heaven will be like that of angels, who are immortal creatures that do not experience marriage. Unlike angels, who are only living spirits, we will remain eternally embodied creatures, like the ascended Christ.

The question of when immortality begins—at the first resurrection or at the final resurrection—is ambiguous in early millennialists' writings. That is because they often describe the first resurrection as of an *immortal* natural body. Perhaps this is because they believed the saints who experience the first resurrection would live for the entire one thousand years, possessing a form of immortality. If Adam had not sinned, his natural body would still be alive today and would be thousands of years old, possessing a form of immortality.

Since the beginning of immortality is ambiguous in their writings, one can simply follow the existence of marriage in their descriptions of the resurrected saints to understand how they defined the nature of the

two resurrections. They consistently describe the first resurrection as of a natural body that experiences marriage, and the final resurrection as of the kind of body that does not experience marriage.

### Justin (c. AD 100–165)

Justin, another well-known early millennialist, is sometimes referred to as Justin Martyr because he was killed by the Romans for his faith. He was born shortly after John wrote the book of Revelation. He was thirty years old when Papias died and most likely had access to his books. Justin's teachings on the millennium can be found in his book *Dialogue with Trypho*. Justin believed in a premillennial return of Christ to destroy the Antichrist and set up his millennial kingdom. But he described the saints who are martyred during the Great Tribulation and resurrected as experiencing marriage and procreation in the millennium. Justin is not the most lucid communicator, so his writings can be difficult to read and understand. Hopefully, my comments in brackets will add some clarity to his teachings. Justin wrote:

Two advents of Christ have been announced: the one, in which He is set forth as suffering, inglorious, dishonoured, and crucified [the first coming]; but the other, in which He shall come from heaven with glory [the second coming to this earth], when the man of apostasy [the Antichrist], who speaks strange things against the Most High, shall venture to do unlawful deeds on the earth against us the Christians, . . . and we who were filled with war, and mutual slaughter, and every wickedness [Christians are martyred during the Tribulation], have [he now transitions to the millennium] each through the whole earth changed our warlike weapons,—our swords into ploughshares, and our spears into implements of tillage [peace on earth],—and we [the resurrected martyred saints] cultivate piety, righteousness, philanthropy, faith, and hope, . . . and sitting each under his vine, i.e., each man possessing his own married wife. For you are aware that the prophetic word says, “And his wife shall be like a fruitful vine.”<sup>15</sup>

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15 Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 110.1.

Justin taught that for the departed saints to inherit the millennial age of peace and righteousness, the first resurrection will be of the natural, Adamic body of flesh and blood that can marry, be fruitful, and multiply. Each man will possess “his own married wife,” who shall be “like a fruitful vine” as the saints fill the earth with their offspring.

In the following quote, notice that Justin linked the first resurrection to the teachings of Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the prophets:

But I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead [the first resurrection], and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged, [as] the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare.<sup>16</sup>

Justin made a direct correspondence between the “resurrection of the dead” at the beginning of the millennium to the teachings of Ezekiel and Isaiah to show how the resurrected saints will inherit the restored Jerusalem in the messianic kingdom. Justin did not need to provide details about the nature of the first resurrection being of the natural body because Ezekiel had already given us a graphic picture of the resurrection of the natural bodies of the departed saints.

In his book, Justin also described the final resurrection after the millennium on Judgment Day. This is when the sons of God will no longer experience marriage, as Jesus taught in his answer to the Sadducees:

And further, there was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied, by a revelation that was made to him, that those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem [through the first resurrection]; and that thereafter [after the millennium] the general, and, in short, the eternal resurrection [the final resurrection of an eternal body] and judgment of all men would likewise take place [Great White Throne judgment]. Just as our Lord also said [to the Sadducees], “They shall neither marry nor

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16 Justin, *Dialogue*, 80.2.

be given in marriage, but shall be equal to the angels, the children of the God of the resurrection.”<sup>17</sup>

Whereas Justin linked the first resurrection to the kind of resurrection the prophets described, he linked the final resurrection on Judgment Day to the type of resurrection Christ described. There are two different kinds of resurrections because the saints are destined to inherit two kingdoms of the triune God—one on the *restored natural earth* for a thousand years and the other in the *eternal kingdom*.

Justin’s views on the two resurrections of the saints can be summarized as follows:

- First resurrection to inherit the Son’s restored natural earth: natural bodies as defined by Ezekiel, that will experience marriage (“each man possessing his own married wife”) and reproduction (“his wife shall be like a fruitful vine”)
- Final resurrection to inherit the Father’s eternal kingdom: eternal bodies as defined by Jesus (“the eternal resurrection . . . Just as our Lord also said, “They shall neither marry nor be given in marriage, but shall be equal to the angels.”)

### **Tertullian (c. AD 160–220)**

Tertullian, another famous early millennialist, believed that the departed saints experience the first resurrection gradually, based on how righteous and faithful they were during their lives. Once this prolonged process of rewarding the saints is complete and the millennium comes to an end, the saints are raptured into incorruptible bodies not to be given in marriage and are then taken to heaven. Tertullian was somewhat unclear as to the nature of the first resurrection at the beginning of the millennium, but he definitely placed the rapture of the saints destined for heaven *after the millennium* at the final resurrection:

Of the heavenly kingdom this is the process. After its thousand years are over, within which period is completed the resurrection of the saints [nature not clear], who rise sooner or later according to their deserts [good deeds] there will ensue the destruction of

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17 Ibid., 81.1.

the world [the last day] and the conflagration of all things [by fire] at the judgment [Judgment Day]: we shall then be changed in a moment ["in the twinkling of the eye"] into the substance of angels [as described by Jesus], even by the investiture of an incorruptible nature [the eternal body no longer given in marriage], and so be removed to that kingdom in heaven.<sup>18</sup>

According to Tertullian, the final resurrection occurs on the last day in conjunction with "the destruction of the world and the conflagration of all things at the judgment" of mankind. This resurrection will be a sudden transformation of our bodies "into the substance of angels," no longer given in marriage. Our bodies will take on an "incorruptible nature" and will be transported to the eternal kingdom of heaven. Tertullian linked this resurrection and rapture of the saints directly to Jesus' answer to the Sadducees, when we shall be "changed in a moment," and given "an incorruptible nature" like that of the angels.

### Commodianus (AD 240)

Tertullian may be unclear as to the nature of the first resurrection, but Commodianus, a North African bishop, is very clear. Only two poems remain from his writings, which are dated sometime around AD 240. These poems only address the nature of the first resurrection and the millennium. It should be noted, however, that his sequence of events surrounding the millennium do not match the sequence found in Revelation. For example, Commodianus taught that the New Jerusalem descends to this Genesis earth at the beginning of the millennium. John, however, clearly taught that after the Genesis earth is destroyed, the New Jerusalem comes down to the new eternal earth—not to the restored earth.

Commodianus also taught that during the millennium the resurrected saints will experience natural lives of marriage and reproduction in an Edenic paradise, as described by Isaiah and the prophets. The saints will possess a form of immortality in that they will live for a thousand years:

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<sup>18</sup> Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, III.25.

From heaven will descend the city in the first resurrection; this is what we may tell of such a celestial fabric. We shall arise again to Him, who have been devoted to Him. And they shall be incorruptible, even already living without death [immortal natural bodies]. And neither will there be any grief nor any groaning in that city. They shall come also who overcame cruel martyrdom under Antichrist, and they themselves live for the whole time [entire millennium], and receive blessings because they have suffered evil things; and they themselves marrying, beget for a thousand years. There are prepared all the revenues of the earth, because the earth renewed without end pours forth abundantly.<sup>19</sup>

According to Commodianus, the devoted followers of Christ who experience the first resurrection will be raised into incorruptible bodies that will no longer experience death and will live for the entire millennium. They will continue to experience marriage and reproduction during the millennium. And they will no longer experience grief but will enjoy an abundant life as restored human beings on the renewed Edenic earth.

If we combine Commodianus's teachings on the first resurrection with Tertullian's teachings on the final resurrection, they would be formulated as follows:

- First resurrection: natural bodies of the departed saints in Christ's messianic kingdom, or "We shall arise again . . . marrying, beget for a thousand years"
- Final resurrection: the raptured bodies of the saints taken "to that kingdom in heaven," when "we shall then be changed in a moment into the substance of angels, even by the investiture of an incorruptible nature [no longer given in marriage]"

Modern premillennialists claim that their understanding of God's endgame accurately reflects the teachings of the early millennialists. This is only partially true. Yes, the early millennialists believed Christ would return at the beginning of the millennium. But rather than the

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<sup>19</sup> Commodianus, *The Instructions of Commodianus in Favour of Christian Discipline. Against the Gods of the Heathens*, XLIV.

first resurrection being of the raptured bodies of the departed saints, as modern premillennialists teach, they taught that the first resurrection will be of the *natural* bodies of the saints that will marry and reproduce. As resurrected male and female human beings, the saints will experience an abundant life on the renewed natural earth for a thousand years. They taught that after the millennium, the saints will experience the final resurrection, which occurs on Judgment Day. This is when the current Genesis earth transitions to the eternal earth and the sons of God are raptured into eternal bodies no longer given in marriage to inherit the Father's eternal kingdom of heaven.

Because the early millennialists had access to the important oral teachings of Christ and the apostles, their views on eschatology have an inherent credibility. This should give premillennialists pause when they so confidently claim that the New Testament teaches that the first resurrection will be of the raptured saints.

### Summary

The ante-Nicene millennialists were not under the same constraints as the Jewish apostles when writing about Christ's earthly kingdom. For this reason, they began to connect the messianic kingdom Ezekiel and the prophets described to the millennium John described in the book of Revelation. Because of this synthesis, they developed a robust form of early millennialism.

Some of the early millennialists, including Papias, knew John personally. John, in turn, had direct access to the oral teachings of Christ. With this oral history, Papias could compose a book devoted to Christ's millennial kingdom in which he described the millennium as an Edenic paradise.

The best way to understand how the early millennialists understood the nature of the two resurrections is to observe which Scriptures they link to these two resurrections. They created a direct link between:

- The **first resurrection** and the resurrection of the natural body described by Ezekiel (which experiences marriage)
- The **final resurrection** and the resurrection of the eternal body described by Jesus (which does not experience marriage)

This correspondence to these Scriptures should erase any doubt as to how they understood the nature of these two resurrections.

In the next chapter, we will continue to explore the important teachings of the ante-Nicene millennialists by examining the teachings of Irenaeus. He is one of the most prominent early church fathers and wrote extensively on the nature of the millennium.