

The Kingdom Is Too Jewish: Exploring the Intersection of Allegorizing and Judaizing vis-à-vis Millenarianism

by Sean Finnegan

Why do so nearly all Christians today believe that the people of God will spend eternity living in heaven with God? Although the bible clearly and in many places teaches just the opposite, one is hard-pressed to find any Christians who believe that God intends to fix the planet rather than evacuate it. In investigating this question, I have arrived at three major reasons why some early Christians rejected God's coming kingdom on earth in favor of a heavenly hope. They thought the kingdom idea was too crude, too hedonistic, and too Jewish. In previous conferences I have addressed the first two reasons and the papers I wrote are available online. However, today I intend to explore this third motivator for jettisoning the biblical hope.

The issue is tied up with two main sub issues: how one interprets scripture (hermeneutics) and combating the fear of losing people to Judaism (apologetics). Before I turn to explain these two main issues and how kingdom deniers beat down their opponents with the alloy forged from their combination, we need to first establish that early Christians really did consider the kingdom idea as too Jewish.

Evidence that Millenarianism Was Considered Jewish

Origen appears to have been the first one to make the connection between Christian millenarians and a Jewish style of interpretation. He writes, "[T]hey understand the divine scriptures in the Judaistic sense" and they "extract from them nothing that is worthy of the divine promises" (*Princ.* 2.11.1-2). To read

Scripture literally was, for Origen, to read it like the Jews, and this was precisely what the millenarians were doing.

His great admirer, Eusebius, took on Origen's ethnic hermeneutical categories. While mentioning Nepos, the millenarian Egyptian bishop, he wrote, "[he] taught that the promises made to the saints in holy Scripture should be interpreted in a more Jewish way" resulting in his belief that "there would be a kind of millennium of bodily luxury on this earth" (*H.E.* 7.24). Here we see the polemic of hedonism combined with the accusation of hermeneutical Judaizing. Eusebius also executed this Origenistic maneuver in his *Commentary on Isaiah*, especially when the text involved promises about inheriting the land of Judea. For Eusebius the grand vision of Isaiah 2 referred not to the eschaton, but rather to the Roman empire itself.¹ However, the Jews understood the prophecy to refer to their own land because they interpreted it corporeally, that is, in a literal sense. Once again we find the confluence of literally exegesis associated with a distinctly Jewish heremetic. Later interpreters like John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea followed in Eusebius' footsteps arguing for a past fulfillment of Isaiah 2.² Robert Wilken observes how Isaiah commentaries came to "give their interpretation of this text a polemical cast

¹ Eusebius, *Commentary on Isaiah* 9:15, 31-32, trans. Robert L. Wilken, "In novissimis diebus: Biblical Promises, Jewish Hopes and Early Christian Exegesis," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1993), 5. (for bibliography: pp. 1-19).

² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Isaiah*; Basil, *Commentary on Isaiah* 1-16

and direct their observations against Jewish views of the text.”³

Although for Origen and Eusebius, the tendency to accuse those who believed in a future kingdom on earth of being too Jewish was confined to the Jewish hermeneutic (reading literally), by the time of Jerome, just believing in an earthly hope was grounds for the accusation of Judaizing. Papias, he says, “published the Jewish opinion of one thousand years [of reign].”⁴ In commenting on an eschatological passage from Zephaniah, Jerome writes, “If one of the Christians . . . reckons that the prophecy is not yet completed, let him know that he falsely bears the name of Christ and that he has a Jewish soul, lacking only circumcision of the body” (*Commentary to Zephaniah* 3.14-18).⁵ Remarking on Isaiah 54, Jerome notes that the Jews along with “our Judaizers” believe the passage refers to Jerusalem and that there will be a kingdom for a thousand years. He goes on to accuse them of loving the “letter that kills” (i.e. interpreting literally) and following after “Jewish ravings” (*Judaica deliramenta*), since they seek to satisfy their gluttony, lust for marriage, and longing for circumcision, sacrifices, and the Sabbath.⁶ In arguing that Jews who converted to Christianity should not keep the law he writes:

“[Those] who assert that the ceremonies of the old Law should be observed in the Church of Christ by the stock of faithful Israel, those should also look forward to a golden Jerusalem for a thousand years, that they may offer sacrifices and be

circumcised, that they may sit on the Sabbath, sleep, become sated, drunk, and rise to frolic, their amusement being offensive to God”
(*Commentary to Isaiah* 53.12).⁷

In Jerome’s mind, Torah observance for Christians coincided with a millenarian eschatology. Hilel I. Newman insightfully remarked, “Keeping in mind the nonchalance with which Jerome is ready to tag his rivals with offensive labels not because they are true, but because they may stick, we can better appreciate the pitfalls of taking even his explicit references to Judaizers at face value.”⁸

Scholars have sometimes wondered whether there really was a connection between millenarianism and Judaizing. To this Newman replies, “Jerome speaks of Christian millenarians of the past and present as *Judaizantes* in the same way as he and his contemporaries use this and related terms in their struggles against various other Christian movements or ideologies who are candidates for such a caricature, without signifying genuine sympathy towards Jews and Judaism.”⁹ This is fairly easy to prove since Jerome sometimes names his millenarian Judaizing opponents. Among the usual suspects are Irenaeus, Tertullian, Victorinus, and Lactantius. Since we know none of these authors were Judaizers, we have solid grounds to read Jerome’s polemic as a caricature rather than as a factual description. “So far as we know,” Newman continues, “none of these authors maintained hopefully that in the millennial kingdom all would offer sacrifices and keep the Sabbath and that all men would be circumcised.”¹⁰ Thus, we see how from Origen to Jerome

³ Wilken, “*In novissimis*,” 7.

⁴ Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 18, trans. Thomas P. Halton, *Saint Jerome: On Illustrious Men*, Fathers of the Church (Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 1999), 37.

⁵ trans. Newman, 441.

⁶ Jerome, *Commentary to Isaiah* 54.1-14

⁷ trans. Newman, 432.

⁸ *ibid.*, 434

⁹ *ibid.*, 440

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 442.

there is a development that tended to accuse millenarianism as being too Jewish.

Standard Christian Response to Judaism

In order to understand how Judaism became associated with literal interpretation we need to consider the historical context of Origen's time, since this idea was largely his invention. Judaism posed a major challenge to Christianity, a challenge in which Origen himself was a lead participant. Although one may have suspected the Judaism of Origen's day to have been on the decline as a result of the combined catastrophes of the Jewish War (A.D. 66-73) and the BarKochba Revolt (A.D. 132-135), by the third century, Wilken notes, "the unhappy memories of BarKochba were beginning to recede into the past, and the hardships that came in the wake of the several wars with the Romans were giving way to economic growth."¹¹ Furthermore, the Jews had certain advantages over the Christians. They had superior access to the Old Testament since they could read the original Hebrew.¹² Christian scholars like Origen (cf. his *Hexapla*) and Jerome (cf. his *Vulgate*) both took the time to learn Hebrew to varying degrees so as to overcome this deficiency.¹³

¹¹ Wilken, *The Land Called Holy*, 72. See also his extensive footnote for sources (fn 26, p. 284).

¹² Wilken compares the situation to "an American scholar living in Germany who knows only English, yet claims to understand Goethe's *Faust* better than native-speaking German scholars." (Wilken, *The Land Called Holy*, 68).

¹³ Origen wrote, "And I make it my endeavour not to be ignorant of their various readings, lest in my controversies with the Jews I should quote to them what is not found in their copies, and that I may make some use of what is found there, even although it should not be in our Scriptures. For if we are so prepared for them in our discussions, they will not, as is their manner, scornfully laugh at Gentile believers for their ignorance of the true reading as they have them." (*A Letter from Origen to Africanus* 5, Crombie, 387.)

The Jews also possessed a much more developed liturgical calendar and they had a reputation for spiritual powers including blessings, curses, exorcisms, and even magic. Up until at least the late fourth century, the allure of Judaism continued to trouble Christian leaders as is evidenced by John Chrysostom's vigorous denunciations of Christians who occasionally attended synagogue and practiced other distinctly Jewish customs (*Against the Jews*).

Judaism posed two major problems for Christians: (1) By their very existence, they confronted Christian thinkers with the question—if Jesus really was the prophesied *Jewish* Messiah, then why did his own people still reject him? (2) They actively competed with Christians for adherents and according to Joseph Trigg, "in Palestine at least, the Jews did very well at it."¹⁴ At the center of this competition was the Jewish denial that Jesus was the actual promised Messiah. The Jewish rebuttal to Jesus centered on the biblical texts related to eschatology, because for the Jews the Messiah played a determinative role in establishing the kingdom of God on earth in the end. Even after both failed attempts to retake Jerusalem in the first two centuries, Jews retained a vibrant faith in a traditional, political, this-worldly messianism, which according to Abba Silver, "assume[d] preeminence in the national consciousness."¹⁵ In speaking about the Judaism of the period, Silver explains:

It should be borne in mind that Messianism was essentially a political idea. It was bound up with the restoration of the Davidic dynasty and with the reconstitution

¹⁴ Trigg, 183.

¹⁵ Abba H. Silver, *A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel, from the First to the Seventeenth Centuries* (Boston: Beacon Press 1959), p. 13.

of the independence of Israel. Certain eschatological and supernatural features were combined with it, but essentially it remained a this-worldly, temporal, national idea.¹⁶

Rabbi Yohanan, a Jew contemporaneous with Origen, while commenting on the Song of Songs says, “One day Jerusalem will be made into a metropolis for all nations and draw to her as a stream to honor her.”¹⁷ In light of the total lack of political fulfillment, the Christian claim that Jesus of Nazareth was the Jewish Messiah lacked cogency. Wilken writes, “If these prophecies have not been fulfilled historically, that is, these things are not happening, then the Messianic age has not arrived and Jesus cannot be the Messiah.”¹⁸

Origen himself recognized that the problem related not to *what* the prophetic Scriptures said, but *how* they were read:

For the hard-hearted and ignorant members of the circumcision have refused to believe in our Savior because they think that they are keeping closely to the language of the prophecies that relate to him, and

¹⁶ *ibid.* Hippolytus, a contemporary of Origen, writes “[T]hey confess that another *Messiah* will come...and that he will usher in some of the signs which the law and the prophets have shown beforehand...And they allege that this *Messiah* will be King over them,—a warlike and powerful individual, who, after having gathered together the entire people of the Jews, *and* having done battle with all the nations, will restore for them Jerusalem the royal city” (Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.25, trans. J. H. Macmahon, vol. 5 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 138).

¹⁷ Wilken, *The Land Called Holy*, 71.

¹⁸ Wilken, “Early Christian Chiliasm”, 307.

they see that he did not literally ‘proclaim release to the captives’ or build what they consider to be a real ‘city of God’...Further, they think that it is the wolf, the four-footed animal, which is said in prophecy to be going to ‘feed with the lamb’...and having seen none of these events literally happening during the advent of him whom we believe to be Christ they did not accept our Lord Jesus, but crucified him on the ground that he had wrongly called himself Christ” (*Princ.* 4.2.1)¹⁹

Christian rebuttals focused on the Jewish understanding of the Messiah and messianism, based primarily in the prophets. To answer this issue Christians developed a

¹⁹ In one of his homilies on Exodus, Origen writes, “The Jews, by misunderstanding it [the Law], rejected Christ. We, by understanding the Law spiritually, show that it was justly given for the instruction of the Church” (Origen, *Exodus Homily* 5.1, trans. Ronald E. Heine, *Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2002)). Because the Jews lacked the exegetical key to understanding the Law, which is found in Christ and the apostles, the Law became harmful to them like poisoned water. Origen writes, “I think that the Law, if it be undertaken according to the letter, is sufficiently bitter and is itself Mara. ...But indeed they cannot taste the bitterness of circumcision nor are they able to endure the bitterness of victims or the observance of the Sabbath. ...If, therefore, the tree of the wisdom of Christ has been thrown into the Law and has shown us how circumcision ought to be understood, how the Sabbath and the law of leprosy are to be observed...then the water of Mara is made sweet and the bitterness of the letter of the Law is changed into the sweetness of spiritual understanding and then the people of God can drink...if anyone without ‘the tree of life,’ that is without the mystery of the cross, without faith in Christ, without spiritual understanding should wish to drink from the letter of the Law, he will die from too much bitterness. Because the apostle Paul knew this he said, ‘The letter kills’” (*Exodus Homily* 7.1).

variety of responses. The Gnostics and Valentinians created cosmic meta-narratives to provide their adherents with an enlightened way of reading the Jewish bible. The side effect of this strategy was that the Jews were looked down upon for reading scripture as if it actually meant what it said. Marcion, as is well known, eliminated the Septuagint from his canon, which again produced a similar downcast attitude towards the Jews. However, a good number of Christian groups committed themselves to the “Old Testament,” and in doing so, according to Michael Hollerich, Christianity “thereby also bound itself to a vindication of its claim to the Jewish Bible against the Jews themselves.”²⁰

Thus, the battle became essentially a hermeneutical one and Origen, more than any other, was the pioneer of developing a distinctly Christian hermeneutic (or at least the perception of one). He had to answer the standard exegetical tradition that interpreted the prophetic promises literally and applied them to the Jewish people.²¹ “[I]n his controversy with the Jews,” writes Trigg, “allegory was Origen’s first line of defense.”²² Sellew writes, “Although the allegorical method of interpretation never won universal acceptance in antiquity, at the start of the Christian era it was nonetheless the dominant scientific device to aid in understanding the true significance of

ancient texts now far removed from their original contexts.”²³

A Brief Introduction to Allegory

Originally applied to Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, allegorical interpretation was a strategy exegetes used to relieve the tension created between holding a high view of a document on the one hand, while recognizing it contained unworthy or immoral elements on the other. Although Plato himself did not approve of allegorizing Homer, he was not above creating his own myths to communicate philosophical truths.²⁴ Likewise the Epicureans spurned allegory and never ceased to criticize the Stoics for their efforts. According to H.I. Marrou, Homer became, in the hands of the Stoics, one who “intentionally conceal[ed] under the veil of myth a complete and detailed body of doctrine, the meaning of which could be discovered by investigating his allegories.”²⁵ By the first century after Christ, Horace and especially Heraclitus developed these metaphorical readings of

²⁰ He also writes, “The need of this vindication continued so long as the existence of a vigorous and substantial Jewish community provided a living counter-argument to the Christian reading of the scriptures.” (Michael J. Hollerich, *Eusebius of Caesarea’s Commentary on Isaiah: Christian Exegesis in the Age of Constantine* (Gloucestershire, UK: Clarendon Press, 1999), 131.)

²¹ Wilken, *The Land Called Holy*, 69.

²² Trigg, 186

²³ Philip Sellew, “Achilles or Christ? Porphyry and Didymus in Debate over Allegorical Interpretation,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 82, no. 1 (January 1989), 86.

²⁴ Plato famously argued in his *Republic* for censoring Homer saying, “Even if they [Homer’s myths] were true I should not think that they ought to be thus lightly told to thoughtless young persons. But the best way would be to bury them in silence” (2.378a). Plato did not even approve of allegorizing them because “the young are not able to distinguish what is and what is not allegory, but whatever opinions are taken into the mind at that age are wont to prove indelible and unalterable” (2.378d-e). Plato’s protest indicates that already by his time people were using allegory to tame Homer’s wilder stories. All quotations of Plato’s *Republic* from Benjamin Jowett, *The Republic and Other Works* (New York: Random House, 1973).

²⁵ H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 169.

Homer further.²⁶ The latter famously quipped, “everything is impious if nothing is allegorical.”²⁷ Even Plutarch moralized Homer for pedagogical reasons.²⁸ The enigmatic Numenius, whom Origen read, likewise employed allegory to harmonize Homer and Plato, not to mention forays into the stories of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Jews.²⁹ Plotinus, Origen’s contemporary, even employed allegory on occasion.³⁰ His disciple, Porphyry, who composed *Against the Christians* in the late third century, attacked the Christian practice of allegory, especially Origen.³¹ Interestingly enough,

²⁶ Horace preferred Homer to any other philosopher as a moral writer and showed how lessons could be extracted from his writings (Horace, *Epistles* 1.2). Heraclitus wrote an extended defense of Homer called *Homeric Problems*, in which he allegorized the unsavory episodes along the lines of physical descriptions of the world or ethical lessons.

²⁷ Heraclitus, *Homeric Problems* 69, trans. Trigg, 33.

²⁸ In *On Reading the Poets*, Plutarch’s argument is that the dim light gained by reading the poets, properly interpreted, could serve a preparatory purpose such that upon introduction to purer philosophies the student would not be so shocked and repelled the brightness of it. Also see Plutarch’s *On Isis and Osiris* and *On the Face in the Moon*.

²⁹ Sellev, 87. For Origen’s defense of Numenius see *Against Celsus* 4.51.

³⁰ In his treatise on love, Plotinus extracted from a myth involving Aphrodite, Kronos, and Eros truths about the nature of love (*En.* 3.5.2). He too recognized that myths, especially Plato’s, serve to communicate high level truths inexpressible otherwise. He grants that they often distort time distinctions, divide powers that are really a unity, and even speak of the births of the unbegotten, but this is all because “the truth is conveyed in the only manner possible” and “it is left to our good sense to bring all together again” (*En.* 3.5.10). He did not doubt that there was “meaning hidden in the Mysteries, and in the Myths of the gods” (*En.* 5.1.7; cf. 4.3.14).

³¹ Porphyry writes, “Some in their desire not to abandon the baseness of the Jewish Scripture but to find an explanation for it, resorted to explanations that were incompatible and out of harmony with what was written, ... ascribing divine inspiration to them as oracles full of hidden mysteries, and by their absurdity bewitching the critical faculty of the mind,

Porphyry did not spurn allegory altogether (he employed it himself in an earlier work),³² rather his criticism was over the biblical text itself, which he thought contained absurdities and immoral behavior, unworthy of allegory. All this is to say that by the time of Origen and his hermeneutical successors, allegory was a widely known and respected way of reading inspired texts.

Apart from Numenius and the Stoics, Origen’s other allegorical influencers were Paul the Apostle, Philo of Alexandria, and Clement of Alexandria. Paul had used allegory to argue against observance of the Law (Galatians 4.21-31). Paul’s contemporary, Philo, in contrast, used allegory everywhere but still believed in Torah observance.³³ Clement of Alexandria probably introduced Origen to Philo and himself applied allegory to the New Testament. Out of these three, Philo, by far, had the greatest influence on Origen’s exegesis. David T. Runia points out that although Origen only mentioned Philo by name three times, he referred to him another twenty times using anonymous phrases, and more than four hundred passages have been identified by editors indicating varying levels of dependency on him.³⁴

Origen defined and defended his use of allegory in his fourth book of *On First Principles*. His argument divides into two main parts. First he sets out to demonstrate that the Bible as a whole is inspired by God

they bring in their own interpretations” (*H.E.* 6.19.4-8).

³² Porphyry’s *On the Cave of the Nymphs* interpreted *Odyssey* 13.102-112 allegorically.

³³ Although he constantly strove to understand the spiritual meaning of the text, he did not abandon literal observance of Torah (On the *Migration Abraham* 89-93).

³⁴ McGuckin, 170. In all likelihood, the reason why Philo’s writings survived was because Origen preserved them in his library at Caesarea.

and then he argues for a deeper meaning of the individual texts that appear unworthy. Trigg articulates Origen's mentality well:

If the Bible is inspired by God but appears in places to be irrelevant to our condition, unworthy of God, or simply banal, we may take it for granted that we have failed to grasp its inner sense. If no spiritual significance is apparent on the surface, we must conclude that this surface, which may or may not be factual, is intended symbolically.³⁵

Whereas modern sensibilities would express caution regarding allegory because of its apparent *ad hoc* nature, for Origen, the opposite was the case. The danger, as he perceived was manifest in those who refused to allegorize like the Jews who rejected Jesus as the Messiah, Marcion who rejected the Old Testament entirely, and the Gnostics who concluded the God of the Septuagint was evil. Origen's allegorical hermeneutic enabled him to move beyond the corporeal outer layer of the text to its soul and spirit. Those who did not grasp these deeper more penetrating meanings could easily be charged with naiveté or ignorance.

What is so puzzling about Origen's frequent declamations against the Jews for interpreting Scripture in a woodenly literal way is that his own system was indebted to Philo the Jew. Still, Philo had lived more than a century earlier and it is conceivable that his Hellenistic Judaism failed to win the hearts of more conservative Jews. Or, maybe allegorical interpretation was for a time popular, even in Palestine, but then as a reaction against Christianity, it was officially discouraged by the Rabbis. R. P. C. Hanson explains:

By the third century it must have become perfectly clear that it was mainly by her use of typology and allegory that the Christian Church was able successfully to retain the Hebrew Scriptures among her holy books... Lauterbach's hypothesis, that allegory was at an early period widely used in Palestinian Judaism, but was later officially discouraged, is almost irresistible.³⁶

This hypothesis makes sense of Origen's constant equating of "Jewish" with "literal" exegesis. However, Nicholas De Lange strongly disagrees that this was the case. He writes, "The polemical doctrine of 'Jewish literalism,' coupled with an only superficial acquaintance with the rabbinic literature, has given rise on occasion to the statement, which is still heard even today, that the tannaitic Rabbis did not practice allegorical interpretation."³⁷ De Lange goes on to demonstrate that the Rabbis of the second and third centuries did actually engage in extensive allegorical exegesis. Furthermore, he thinks Origen did "rely on the Rabbis both for the 'carnal' and for the 'spiritual' interpretation of Scripture."³⁸ De Lange accounts for Origen's powerful invective against Jewish literalism as the natural consequence of competition between the church and the synagogue for adherents. It is possible Origen was oversimplifying matters and painting Judaism with a broad brush because on the issue of greatest concern—whether or not Jesus was the Messiah—the Jews did use literal exegesis

³⁵ Trigg, 121.

³⁶ R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory & Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 35.

³⁷ Nicholas R. M. De Lange, *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in Third-Century Palestine*, (London, Cambridge University Press, 1976), 112.

³⁸ De Lange, 121.

as their primary tool to defeat the Christian claim. Even if the actual facts of the matter were otherwise, Origen's stereotype stuck. Owing to his massive influence on subsequent thought, Christians came to think of themselves as those who interpreted spiritually whereas the Jews were limited to a "carnal" reading according to the letter.

Privileging Allegory Resulted in Rejecting Millenarianism as Judaizing

Our previous two reasons, that millenarianism was crude and hedonistic, functioned as triggers to allegorize. Texts related to inheriting the land, especially, had to be reconfigured. Origen explains:

Moreover there are many prophecies spoken of Israel and Judah, which relate what is going to happen to them. And when we think of the extraordinary promises recorded about these people, promises that so far as literary style goes are poor and distinguished by no elevation or character that is worthy of a promise of God, is it not clear that they demand a mystical interpretation? (*Princ.* 4.3.6)

In *Against Celsus* he defends a non-terrestrial reading of the promise to inherit the land.

Moses...introduces God as promising to those who lived according to His law the holy land, which is 'a good land and a large, a land flowing with milk and honey;' which promise is not to be understood to refer, as some suppose, to that part of the earth which we call Judea; for it, however good it may be, still forms part of the earth, which was originally cursed

for the transgression of Adam...we have confined ourselves to these few words at present, which are intended to remove the idea, that what is said of the good land promised by God to the righteous, refers to the land of Judea. Both Judea and Jerusalem were the shadow and figure of that pure land, goodly and large, in the pure region of heaven, in which is the heavenly Jerusalem. And it is in reference to this Jerusalem that the apostle spoke, as one who, 'being risen with Christ, and seeking those things which are above,' had found a truth which formed no part of the Jewish mythology. (*Against Celsus* 7.28-29)³⁹

Origen identified the literal reading of the Old Testament land promises to be "Jewish mythology!" In light of the titanic struggle Origen led to combat Judaism, the millenarians were particularly distasteful and appeared to be siding with the Jews.⁴⁰ Thus, Wilken notes, "Origen presents Christian chiliasm and Jewish Messianism as a single phenomenon."⁴¹ Wilken goes on:

From Origen's perspective Christian chiliasm and Jewish messianism were of a piece... it is clear that what disturbs him is that if the chiliasts are

³⁹ His two primary biblical texts applied repeatedly to make his case that promises featuring Jerusalem and the land of Judea should be understood as earthly analogs of a heavenly hope were Galatians 4.26; Hebrews 12.22. Wilken notes how Origen broke with earlier exegetes in interpreting these texts. In fact, Irenaeus and Tertullian had cited the same Galatians text to make the point that the future Jerusalem would actually be on earth! (Wilken, *The Land Called Holy*, 70; see also Origen, *Princ.* 4.3.6-8).

⁴⁰ Wilken notes, "Early Christian chiliasm is the obverse side of Jewish Messianism" ("Early Christian Chiliasm," p. 300).

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 302.

correct, the promises of the prophets cannot have been fulfilled in the coming of Christ and hence the messianic age has not yet begun.⁴²

Over a century later Jerome gave the following hermeneutical advice vis-à-vis millenarians and Jews:

The wise Christian reader should retain this rule of prophetic promises: whatever the Jews and our Judaizers—or rather not ours—contend will happen carnally, we should show to have been accomplished already spiritually, so that we not be compelled to Judaize, according to the apostle, on account of these sorts of tales and tangled questions (*Commentary to Isaiah* 11.15-16).⁴³

Although so many of these Judaizing charges centered on the alleged millenarian desire to observe Torah in the age to come, evidence is severely lacking to indicate any of them argued for eschatological circumcision, Sabbath observance, or sacrificial offerings.⁴⁴ The polemic was developed as a consequence of Christian competition with Judaism, and as with so many rhetorical contrivances, it stuck.

Conclusion

Christian thinkers like Origen (3rd century), Eusebius (4th century), and Jerome (5th century) rejected the kingdom because it was too Jewish. The Jewish objection to Jesus was that if he really was the Messiah,

then why didn't he usher in the messianic age? The standard Christian response was that he did. The kingdom prophecies of the Old Testament find their fulfillment in the church when interpreted correctly. Only by stubbornly holding to a woodenly literal interpretation could they miss the kingdom age happening right before them. Already, in the church the kingdom had arrived for those with eyes to see. Although this line of reasoning effectively combated the Jewish objection to Jesus, aren't there other possibilities that do not force us to so aggressively set aside the plain reading of scripture?

What about the idea of two comings? Jesus comes the first time to redeem humankind and the second time to establish God's kingdom on earth. Thus, the Messiah has come and he engaged in a lot of messianic activity, but he did not consummate the messianic age, yet. That is what he is coming back to do. This simple solution to the same problem frees us to accept the many kingdom prophecies and embrace "Jewish" interpretations. Thus when Jesus says the meek will inherit the earth, we need not insist that this has already happened (Matthew 5.5). When Daniel prophecies about a coming kingdom where all people, nations, and languages will serve the Son of Man (Daniel 7.13-14), we can simply accept this beautiful hope without engaging in interpretational contortions.

Furthermore, over the last century scholars have completely reversed their estimation of the importance of the Jewishness of Jesus. Following Albert Schweitzer's devastating critique, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, in 1906, Jesus scholars became sensitive to the danger of reconstructing a Jesus in their own image. Now, people find a non-Jewish Jesus hard to believe. Often, the more Jewish one's interpretation, the more

⁴² *ibid.*, *The Land Called Holy*, 77.

⁴³ trans. Newman, 432-3.

⁴⁴ Hill makes an interesting argument that Marcion and Cerinthus both believed the Jewish golden age would occur, but that this was because the God of the Jews was an evil God who sought to burden them with such things (Hill, "Cerinthus," 159-170).

plausible it is. The apocalyptic Jesus, proclaiming the coming reign of God on earth is immensely more believable than the sanitized belief in a disembodied heavenly existence of souls enjoying a beatific vision *ad infinitum*.