EARLY CHRISTIAN EXPECTATIONS CONCERNING THE RETURN OF JESUS

From imminent parousia to the millennium

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ABSTRACT

On the background of revived millennial expectations and the commercially exploited eschatological notions, this article reconstructs the origins of Christian hopes concerning the return of Jesus (parousia) through the development of eschatological ideas in the New Testament. It is shown how the eschatological tradition in the New Testament underwent constant revision in reaction to the experience of the early Christian writers while maintaining the imminent, yet indeterminate hope in the return of Jesus. It was only later through selective literalism and divorcing the text from its original context, that millennial readings, particularly of Revelation, gained any currency in Christian thought.

The impending “millennium” calls attention to Christian eschatological beliefs, however far removed these may in fact be from popular perceptions and the commercial hype which surrounds the approach of the year 2000 CE, or, to be more correct, 2001 CE. The purpose of this study is to reconstruct the origins of Christian parousia hopes, and the development of eschatological ideas in the New Testament. It will be shown that the millennial expectations being revived in some Christian circles and residual eschatological notions being exploited commercially are not founded upon New Testament teaching. Early Christian writings bear witness to a shifting eschatological consciousness as the first generations of Christians were constantly called to review their expectations in the light of earthly experience, in particular the continuing non-return of Christ in glory.

The background of Christian eschatology

Eschatology does not begin with Christianity, but is rooted in the Jewish prophetic-apocalyptic tradition.1 Underlying all such expectations is the conviction that God would, at some point in the future, intervene in the affairs of the world. Quite how this intervention was conceived varied from influencing the course of terrestrial history to the cataclysmic overturning of the prevailing human order and the establishment of divine rule on earth, in which the nation of Israel would be specially privileged.2 Divine rule would in many eschatological scenarios be represented or mediated by human or heavenly judges, rulers, or other redeemer figures whose role was conceived in terms of the experience of the various communities and the nature of their perceived need of deliverance.

Early Christian expressions of parousia hopes reflect and reinterpret ideas and texts from the Jewish prophetic-apocalyptic tradition.3 These include both such texts which express a general expectation of divine deliverance for Israel and judgement upon her enemies, and those which speak of a heavenly or human redeemer figure. One such line of interpretation derives from the “one like a son of man” coming on the clouds of heaven in Dan 7:13, reflected most explicitly in first century Christian writing in the “Son of Man” as eschatological judge and redeemer in the synoptic eschatological discourse (Matt 24:37-44; Mark 13:24-27; Luke 21:25-28; cf. 17:2-37). While the derivation and significance of the expression “son of man” are a matter of scholarly controversy,4 it is clear that the usage in the synoptic eschatological discourse reflects the apocalyptic tradition deriving from Ezekiel and Daniel.

Where Christian expressions of eschatological expectation differed from those of other Jewish groups was essentially in their identification of Jesus of Nazareth with the Messiah or other redeemer figure, in this case the “Son of Man”. At the same time we should expect, even though we cannot always reconstruct, that the early church reinterpreted these eschatological figures so as to harmonise them with their experience and understanding of Jesus.5 Other groups also identified historical with eschatological figures.


3 Cf. L. Hartmann, Prophecy interpreted (Uppsala: Almquist & Wiksell, 1966).


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tological figures. Just as some Christians identified the "Son of Man" with Jesus, the Similitudes of Enoch (1 Enoch 37-71) identify this figure with Enoch (Gen 5:21-24), at least in ch. 71. Similarly, Christian identification of Jesus as the Messiah can be compared with Rabbi Aqiba's identification of Simon bar Kosiba as Messiah (y. Ta'an 68b; b. Sanh 93b; Lam R 2:2) and the claims made for and on behalf of Menahem (BJ 2:434) and Simon bar Giora (BJ 4:575; 5:309; 7:29) during the Jewish War of 66-70 CE. Just as Christology effected a conflation of disparate conceptions of an idealised redeemer figure identified with Jesus, so early Christian eschatology reflects a conflation of diverse traditions within first century Judaism, reinterpreted with Jesus as the redeemer figure.

Eschatology and the teaching of Jesus and his disciples

Since Schweitzer drew the attention of scholarship to the apocalyptic underpinning of the teaching of Jesus, this eschatological orientation, not only of his reign of God sayings but also of his ethical teaching and mastery over nature, has profoundly influenced historical Jesus scholarship. More recent critical approaches to the Gospels have, to varying degrees, questioned the eschatological orientation of Jesus' teaching. This reinterpretation of Jesus, while to some extent founded upon sound criticisms of earlier positions, rests essentially upon significantly different reconstructions of the tradition history behind the canonical gospels. Some qualifications and refinements are clearly required to Schweitzer's image of Jesus as an apocalyptic visionary, as many of its premises are no longer tenable. There are nevertheless sound reasons for believing that eschatology was fundamental to the teaching of Jesus, and to the earliest written accounts thereof. More recent contributions to the debate by scholars

6 Col定律, The apocalyptic imagination, 152-153; Russell, The method and message, 349.
7 Cf. R. A. Horsley and J. S. Hanson, Bandits, prophets and messiahs (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 88-134.
11 S. J. Patterson, The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1993); Taylor, "Prolegomena to a reconstruction".
12 Sanders, The historical figure; Taylor, "Prolegomena to a reconstruction".

who have pioneered the new approaches have been more sensitive to the eschatological element in the teaching of Jesus and the earliest gospel traditions, without accepting that Jesus' thought was fundamentally shaped by apocalypticism. While the evidence for the fundamental influence of eschatology upon Jesus' teaching seems overwhelming, it is more difficult to establish how precisely he related his own role to the unfolding eschatological events he anticipated. What is clear is that, after his crucifixion and their Easter experience, his disciples were able to articulate an eschatological hope in which Jesus was identified with the expected redeemer figure. It is evident from such texts as Mark 9:1, which persisted in the gospel tradition despite disconfirmation of a statement attributed to Jesus, and the level of eschatological concern evident from 1 Thessalonians (4:13-18), that the first Christians believed that the parousia of Christ would take place during their lifetime.

While it is clear that the first Christians expected the return of Jesus within their generation, it is equally clear that this did not transpire, and still has not taken place. Disconfirmation of expectations requires either their abandonment or a process of reinterpretation which makes those beliefs and expectations tenable. In modern social science, this phenomenon is often analysed using the cognitive dissonance theory propounded by Festinger and his collaborators. Cross-cultural and historical studies of movements, which articulate very explicit expectations that are subsequently and often dramatically disconfirmed, indicate that this is a universal human phenomenon, and not one which can be limited to any particular social or cultural context. That the early Christians experienced disconfirmation of their expectation of Jesus' return can scarcely be doubted. The issues which need to be considered concern when and how this came about, and how they responded to that disconfirmation. I shall examine these issues in turn.

It is commonly supposed that the early Christians did not experience disconfirmation of their expectation of the return of Jesus until towards the end of the first century, and that this occasioned the crystallisation of ecclesiastical structures, the composition of the Gospels, and the abandonment of earlier social radicalism for closer con-
formity with the prevailing mores of the surrounding society. This process is commonly known as "Early Catholicism". The issues generally identified as having given rise to disconfirmation during this period are that the original witnesses to Jesus' ministry, who had expected his return in their lifetime (Mark 9:1; cf. 1 Thess 4:13-18), would have died by the end of the first century CE, and that the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 CE would have presented a crisis to the early Christians which could have been resolved only through the return of Christ. While at first sight these points seem plausible, after closer investigation they prove to be unlikely.

It is undoubtedly true that the original witnesses to Jesus' ministry had expected Jesus to return during their lifetime, and that they would all have been dead by the last quarter of the first century CE. However, the question of life expectancy in the world of early Christianity needs to be considered. The proverbial "three score years and ten" (Ps 90:10) may have been the expected lifespan of the more privileged classes, but even among these it is likely to have been the exception. Jesus and his original disciples came from an agrarian society in Galilee, where the populace were subject not only to the vicissitudes of climate but also to extortion and repression by the Herodian aristocracy and its appendages. Life in such conditions meant the perennial threat, if not of famine, at least of serious food shortages, with the consequent debilitating diseases, and the consequence of a much shorter life expectancy, even for the minority who survived to adulthood. Even in a more favourable socio-economic environment, life expectancy was much lower than is generally appreciated. Most eye-witnesses to Jesus' ministry would have died by the middle of the first century, or shortly thereafter (cf. 1 Cor 15:56). Any crisis for Christian faith brought about by their demise (cf. John 21:23) would therefore have confronted the Church several decades at least before the end of the first century. Furthermore, the evidence of 1 Thess 4:13-18 suggests that it was not only the deaths of eye-witnesses to the historical ministry of Jesus, but any deaths (other than by martyrdom) in the Christian communities which precipitated something of a crisis. This issue confronted as young a Christian community as Thessalonica, as early as c. 50 CE, within no more than two or three years of its foundation. Even if the general expectation could be redefined so as to apply only to some of the eye-witnesses to Jesus' ministry (cf. Mark 9:1), any disconfirmation of eschatological expectations on this account would have been perceived long before the end of the first century CE. Indeed, it is possible that the narrowing of the category of those who could expect to survive until the parousia is precisely the result of redefinition in response to an earlier experience of disconfirmation.

20 B. J. Malina and R. L. Rohrbaugh, Social science commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 41; 211; 305.

The fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple

The significance of the fall of Jerusalem for Christianity has been widely debated in scholarship. This event has been perceived to have had implications for the continuing place of Christianity within Judaism, as well as for the direction in which Christianity and rabbinic Judaism developed during the ensuing decades. In addition, it has been argued that the Christians, at least in Judaea if not elsewhere, would have expected the return of Jesus either to have pre-empted or to have followed immediately upon the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. The synoptic eschatological discourses are frequently interpreted in this light. It is, however, doubtful whether the implications of the fall of Jerusalem were perceived in this way, either within Judaism or within Christianity (using these overlapping terms here for convenience only). The Temple had previously been destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE (2 Kings 25:9), but had subsequently been rebuilt (Ezra 3:6). Interpretation of Jeremiah and the exilic prophets during the post-70 CE period would have instilled a hope and an expectation that with the passing of time and changing political fortunes the Temple would be rebuilt, perhaps after seventy years (Jer 25:11-12; 29:10).

In addition, the so-called Second Temple had been desecrated and pillaged by both Seleucid and Roman invaders and rulers (1 Macc 1:54-61; Josephus, BJ 1:152-55,179), and Herod's rebuilding had in many ways violated Jewish religious sensibilities (Josephus, BJ 1:647-55; AJ 17:149-67). So far as the Jewish people were concerned, therefore, the destruction of Herod's Temple did not of necessity require a reconstruction of Judaism without the Temple, but rather preparation for the building of a new Temple in the not too distant future, one which would be uncontaminated by idolatry or any other form of impurity. The developments in rabbinic Judaism between the fall of Jerusalem and the Bar Kokbah uprising should be understood in terms not of rendering the Temple cult obsolete because it was no longer available, but of preparing Israel for the anticipated restoration of Jerusalem and rebuilding of the Temple and resumption of the sacrificial cult. The selection of the exilic and post-exilic figures of Baruch and Ezra as pseudepigraphical apocalyptic visionaries further illustrates an expectation that the pattern of exile and restoration would be repeated.

The destruction of Jerusalem undoubtedly had long-term implications for the Jewish character of Christianity, as the devastation of Palestine and the dispersion of Christian

24 Cf. S. J. D. Cohen, From the Maccabees to the Mishnah (Minneapolis: Westminster, 1987) 218.
communities there created a geographical and cultural chasm between the increasing- 
ly genteel churches to the west and the regrouping of Jewish Christian communities to the east of the Jordan. It is also clear that Christian writings of the post-70 period, including the eschatological discourses of Matthew 24 and Luke 21, express no hope or expectation that the Temple would be rebuilt. But this does not imply that the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in and of themselves precipitated a crisis for Christian eschatological hopes. Four factors here seem relevant. One is that Christianity was by 70 CE geographically so widespread and so varied in its identification with Jewish institutions that the effects of the destruction of Jerusalem could not have been felt uniformly. The second, as noted above, is that by 70 CE at least the overwhelming majority of eye-witnesses to Jesus’ ministry would have died. Thirdly, the literary remains of early Christianity testify to a repudiation of the Temple while it was still standing. Fourthly, disconfirmation of Christian eschatological hopes would have been experienced much earlier in the history of the Church than 70 CE.

The Gospels bear very clear witness to the tradition that Jesus had prophesied the destruction of the Temple. This is attested in the prologue to the synoptic eschatological discourse (Matt 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6) and in the trial and crucifixion narratives in Matthew (26:61; 27:40) and Mark (14:58; 15:29). It is furthermore implicit in the synoptic accounts of the incident commonly but incorrectly known as the “cleaning” of the Temple, and explicit in the Johannine account thereof (Matt 21:12-17; Mark 11:11-19; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-21). In the synoptic accounts, particularly Matthew and Mark, there is a direct link between Jesus’ pronouncement of destruction upon the Temple and his indictment before the high priest. The destruction of the Temple is therefore an event the first Christians would have expected to take place, and which would in itself therefore have precipitated no crisis for them. On the contrary, it would have vindicated their faith in Jesus as eschatological judge. This would undoubtedly have had implications for their relations with Temple-oriented fellow-Jews, both before and after the events of 70 CE. If the destruction of Jerusalem precipitated any crisis for Christians, this would have been on account of disconfirmed eschatological expectations, that the parousia would coincide with or immediately follow the destruction of the Temple. This, however, is unlikely, as I shall hope to demonstrate.

In 40 CE, the emperor Gaius Caligula ordered that his statue be placed in the Temple in Jerusalem, in other words that he be worshipped by the Jewish people. The reaction this provoked among the Palestinian Jewish people was documented by Philo (Legat 197-337) and Josephus (BJ 2:184-203; AJ 18:256-309), but its impact on early Christianity has received less than adequate attention. The popular uprising among the Jewish people certainly threatened a catastrophe such as befell Palestinian Jewry thirty years later. Had not the Roman Legate of Syria exercised considerable restraint and Caligula been assassinated early in 41 CE, the outcome of this episode would have been very different. Nevertheless, there was in Palestine a crisis of several months duration, which was inextricably bound up with the Temple, and which could have led to the destruction of Jerusalem. This was the first potentially cataclysmic situation to confront the Palestinian Christians since their Easter experience, and it would have seemed to them precisely the crisis which would bring their eschatological hopes to fulfillment. The destruction of the Temple had been prophesied by Jesus, and the Christians would have expected this to come about in the struggle between Jewish popular resistance and the Roman legions enforcing the imperial decree. The defusion of the crisis, without the destruction of the Temple or the eschatological return of Jesus, would have posed a crisis of disconfirmation for the Palestinian Christians. The eschatological discourse in Mark 13, which, as I have argued previously, reflects the reconstruction of Judean Christian eschatological beliefs in the aftermath of the Caligula crisis, separates the destruction or desecration of the Temple from the parousia of Christ. This tradition is inherited by Matthew and Luke, for both of whom the fall of Jerusalem presents no eschatological crisis but rather brings the parousia of Christ one step closer (Matt 24:15-31; Luke 21:20-28). Even if for some Christians the fall of Jerusalem posed a crisis for their eschatological hopes, this would not have been the first occasion on which the Christians were required to confront disconfirmed beliefs. While it is possible, if highly unlikely, that there were surviving eye-witnesses to Jesus’ ministry in 70 CE, and that their declining numbers aggravated any crisis precipitated by the destruction of the Temple, this would nonetheless not have been the first occasion of disconfirmation in the history of Christianity. No extant Christian writings of the post-70 CE period reflect such a crisis, and while it is possible that groups maintaining a linkage between the fall of the Temple and the parousia of Christ perished without leaving any literary legacy, there is nonetheless no evidence to support the notion of an eschatological crisis in the aftermath of 70 CE. Matthew and Luke reflect no sense of crisis at the delayed parousia, but see the destruction of the Temple as a stage in the historical process that would lead to their eschatological vindication. If these evangelists betray any anxiety at all, it is a
concern to maintain eschatological expectations in the face of complacency among Christians. This concern is attested much earlier in the tradition, even within Q, and therefore pre-dates the fall of Jerusalem.

The delayed parousia

The problem of the delayed parousia would therefore have arisen not at the end of the first century, but rather within the first decade of the Christian church. As observed above, disconfirmation leaves adherents with the option either of abandoning the disconfirmed belief/s, or of reinterpreting them so that they remain tenable. While such texts as 2 Pet 3:1-7 and possibly some of the letters to the seven churches of Revelation (2:5, 16; 3:3) may reflect abandonment by some Christians of their belief that Jesus would return as eschatological judge, and it may be that Christians did leave the Church on this account, there is naturally rather more extant evidence of redefinition and reinterpretation of eschatological expectations in the New Testament.

The synoptic eschatological tradition, represented in its earliest extant form in Mark 13, testifies to the reinterpretation of Christian expectations to accommodate a delayed parousia somewhat detached from the preceding desecration of the Temple. This observation stands, irrespective of whether the eschatological discourse in Mark substantially represents the redefinition of Palestinian Christian expectations in the early 40s CE, or whether it reflects anticipation of the destruction of Jerusalem during the Jewish War of 66-70 CE, or even if it post-dates 70 CE. Matthew and Luke develop this tendency further, though both Gospels give some indication of having been written after rather than before 70 CE.

While the crisis of the delayed parousia would have confronted the early Christians in Palestine for the first time in 41 CE, this does not mean that the problem was resolved for all Christians at that time. The letters of Paul indicate that churches in Greece, far removed from the Jewish Temple and predominantly gentile in ethnic character, experienced the problem of the delayed parousia in diverse ways. In 1 Thessalonians (c. 51 CE) the crisis is precipitated by deaths in the community (4:13-18), which suggests an expectation that Jesus would return in the lifetime of the first believers. 2

34 Gaston, No stone on another, 366-368; 483-486.
35 Jacobson, The first gospel, 232.
37 Taylor, "Palestinian Christianity ii"; Theissen, The gospels in context, 125-165.
38 Collins, The beginning of the gospel, 73-91; Hengel, Studies, 14-30.
39 Hooker, Mark, 297-303; Kelber, The kingdom.

Thessalonians (possibly contemporary with 1 Thessalonians, possibly much later), on the other hand, and possibly 1 Corinthians (c. 54 CE), reflect some degree of reinterpretation of eschatological expectations. In the case of 2 Thessalonians this takes the form of an over-realised eschatology (2:2) which maintained that the parousia had in fact already taken place. To this Paul responds by reaffirming very strongly a future eschatology, with a definite series of events which would have to precede the return of Christ (2:3-12). In 1 Corinthians another form of realised eschatology seems to have taken hold in the community, which led some members to deny the resurrection of the dead (15:12). The precise nature of the denial of the resurrection has been widely debated in scholarship. The issue of concern to us, however, is what gave rise to this situation. Previous theories regarding gnosticising tendencies in Corinth are no longer widely supported in scholarship. It would seem clear that the resurrection was recontextualised rather than denied, despite the nature of Paul's polemic. What was denied was resurrection as a future (physical) event. In other words the Corinthian Christians who maintained this position claimed that their eschatological hopes were already fulfilled, or would be fulfilled without a physical resurrection. It would seem quite likely that this situation arose in response to disconfirmation of previously held expectations of an imminent but future parousia. The response to disconfirmation was to reconcile the parousia and the resurrection as already realised in the life of the Christian community.

Paul's own reflections reveal a shifting eschatological consciousness. In 1 Thess 4:15 he expects that Christ would return during his lifetime, and this assumption still seems to hold in 1 Cor 15:51, written perhaps three or four years later (c. 54 CE). In 2 Cor 5:1-10, written perhaps only a year later, and in Phil 1:21-4, Paul seems to expect or wish-to-die before the return of Christ. He nevertheless maintains an expectation of an imminent parousia (Rom 13:11-12). The acknowledgement that he might die before the return of Christ does not mean for Paul that this event has been relegated to the indefinite future. It reflects no fundamental change in his theology, but rather the circumstances in his own life and his prospects of survival in an hostile environment. It was not so much that the parousia had been delayed, but that Paul himself might meet his death before it took place. The parousia remains imminent despite the fact that it is no longer expected in Paul's lifetime.

42 Wanamaker, Thessalonians, 37-44; 53-63.
43 Wanamaker, Thessalonians, 238-240.
47 Possibly from the same period, possibly some years later.
48 Pfeilnik, Paul and the parousia, 276-280; cf. J. D. G. Dunn, The theology of Paul the apostle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).
We have noted that the first Christians had expected the parousia of Christ within their generation. The experience of disconfirmation, through the defusion of the Caligula crisis and the deaths of Christians in various communities, and indeed through the prospect of a violent death at the hands of the civil authorities in the case of Paul, led to a realisation that believers could and would die before the return of Christ. This did not inevitably lead to a notion of an indefinitely delayed parousia, and still less to the idea of a fixed period before the return of Christ. Rather, Christians were urged by Paul, by Matthew, by Luke, by 2 Peter, to maintain their faith in an imminent parousia. Far from the fall of Jerusalem precipitating a major crisis of faith, the early Christian records testify to continuous grappling with the issue of the delayed parousia from very early in the days of the Judean church. Any crisis in 70 CE would have been less acute than that in 41 CE, not least because the destruction of the Temple was no longer seen as simultaneous with the parousia and Christians had by that date acquired some experience in reconfiguring their eschatological hopes in the light of the experience of disconfirmation.

**New Testament eschatology and the millennium**

Our discussion thus far has made no mention of the concept of the millennium. This is because, quite simply, it does not enter into early Christian expectations regarding the return of Christ. As has been clear from our treatment of the Gospels and the Pauline letters, the first Christians expected the return of Christ to be imminent, and the only chronological factor seems to have been the lifespan of the first generation of Christians themselves. There is no record of any attempt to compute the duration of this period of expectation chronologically (cf. Acts 1:7). While there is evidence that at least some Christians sought to interpret events in the world around them as portents of the parousia of Christ, there is nonetheless no indication that a precise length of time was calculated. This is as true of the book of Revelation as it is of other early Christian writings.

The thousand years of Revelation 20 refers not to the period of terrestrial history preceding the parousia of Christ, but to a period after the return of Christ (Rev 19:11-16). During this period Christ would rule his messianic kingdom on earth, before the final eschatological events: the unleashing of evil and Christ’s final victory thereover, the resurrection of the dead, judgement, and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 20:22). While it has been argued that this is the only occasion in the New Testament of an interim period between the return of God and the final consummation of the eschatological events, a transitional phase, however momentary, is at least intimated by Paul in 1 Cor 15:24-28. Such intervening periods are attested elsewhere in Jewish eschatological thought in Jubilees 1:29; 1 Enoch 10-11; 21:6; 91-93; 2 Enoch 25:33; 2 Baruch 30-40; 72-74; 4 Ezra 7:26-30; Sibylline Oracles 3: 46-62, 741-61, 767-84; Josephus, AJ 18:85-86 (referring to the Samaritans).

It is significant in the light of subsequent millenarian interpretations that the thousand years of Revelation 20 do not precede the parousia, but follow it. In Revelation the expectation of the return of Christ is as imminent (22:7) as elsewhere in the New Testament. It is only through reinterpretation of Revelation, so that the period of the Church becomes identified with Christ’s rule on earth, that the thousand years can be construed as a period of waiting for the parousia of Christ, and the last judgement identified with the parousia. Augustine interprets the birth of Jesus as the beginning of the thousand years (Civ Dei 20:7-9), and, while this has clearly been influential in shaping Christian millennial thinking, it depends more on eisegesis than exegesis. Such an interpretation is utterly implausible in the context in which Revelation was written. Christians living in the situation reflected in Revelation, experiencing persecution or at least perceiving themselves to be persecuted at the hands of imperial and civic authorities, could not have imagined that Christ was ruling on earth during that period, or that evil was subject to any kind of restraint. While this line of interpretation has inspired such Christian millenarian movements as that associated with Joachim of Fiore, it has no basis in the text or in the interpretation of its first generations of readers, such as Papias (cited by Eusebius, HE 39:11-13), Justin (Dial. 80-81), the Epistle of Barnabas (15:4-9), and Irenaeus (AH 5:28.3). This is true even of the Montanists (Tertullian, Marc 3:24). It is, furthermore, worth observing that a symbolic rather than chronological significance to the period of one thousand years is attested in early Christianity in 2 Pet 3:8, and is rooted in the biblical tradition in Ps 90:4.

To conclude, therefore, there is no basis in the New Testament for the notion that the date of the parousia of Christ can be computed or projected. The early Christian writers are resolute in maintaining their belief that Christ would return in glory and in judgement, despite experiences of disconfirmation giving rise to doubts in some of their communities. While a number of early Christian writers identify antecedent signs and events before which the parousia could not take place, none proceeds to predict when this would happen. The hope they maintain is imminent but at the same time indeterminate. It is only in later interpretations of Revelation, through selective literalism and divorcing the text from its original context, that millennial readings gained any currency in Christian thought. The early Church began with a hope and expectation that Christ would return in glory at some point in the immediate future. Disconfirmation of this belief through the passing of time and the failure of related expectations led not to abandonment of that hope but to its reinterpretation. The hope remained imminent if less tied to events in terrestrial history, and accordingly chronologically increasingly indeterminate. The notion of a millennium rests upon a reversal of this trend, and is foreign to the early Christian pattern of grappling with disconfirmation and uncertainty.


50 Sweet, Revelation, 287-288.