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Cerinthus

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Introduction

Cerinthus was remembered as the adversary of John, the 'disciple of the Lord' who resided in the city of Ephesus in the late first century CE. This 'John' was either one of Jesus's twelve apostles or another prominent Christian leader who ministered in the region of Asia Minor and came to be confused with the apostle of the same name (cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.4; 5.33.4; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.31.3; 3.39.4–7; 5.20.5–6; 5.24.2; 7.25.16). There are obstacles for the historian attempting to reconstruct Cerinthus's biography because Cerinthus did not leave any writings for posterity and the sources about him were composed by uniformly hostile witnesses. For instance, the students of the second-century bishop Polycarp of Smyrna retold a tale about the day John noticed Cerinthus in a public bathhouse in Ephesus and exclaimed that the walls might collapse because the 'enemy of the truth' was inside the building (cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.4). The problem with the sources also means that it is difficult to reconstruct Cerinthus's teachings while his name is associated with a debate about the authorship of both the Gospel of John and the Apocalypse of John.

The ancient witnesses, then, did not agree about the substance of Cerinthus's teachings. Some commented on his eschatology, meaning his opinions about the end of the present age, and his expectation that anyone who lives during the millennium when Jesus reigns on the earth will enjoy material blessings. Others noted his cosmology, meaning his beliefs about the origin of the universe, and how he assigned the creation of the material world to an inferior divine being. Since these two viewpoints seem to be incompatible, many scholars are adamant that Cerinthus only endorsed the former view (e.g., Wurm 1904; Bardy 1921; Skarsaune 1987, 407–9; Myllykoski 2005) or the latter view (e.g., Brown 1982, 766–72; Pétrement 1984, 298–307; Hengel 1989, 59–60, 182–84n38; DeConick 2016, 155–60). Yet some scholars surmise that Cerinthus managed to combine the two positions in a new theological synthesis (e.g., Daniélou 1964, 68–69, 384; Markschies 1998; Hill 2000; Hällström and Skarsaune 2007; Kok 2019, 43–45). Given that our extant testimonies about Cerinthus are late and polemical, there may be room for doubt about whether we have any reliable information about Cerinthus apart from the fact that he taught in Asia Minor (Klijn and Reinink 1973, 19). One scholar is even open to the possibility that Cerinthus never existed as a historical figure (Pétrement 1984, 308–11). This article will provide an overview of the oldest sources about Cerinthus and review the arguments concerning whether or not he was an early champion of millenarianism.

The Sources on Cerinthus's Cosmology

The earliest reference to Cerinthus is found in the mid-second-century *Epistle of the Apostles*, a text which fictitiously presents itself as a letter dispatched by the twelve disciples of Jesus to counter what was seen to be the poisonous deception spread by the 'false apostles' Simon and Cerinthus (1, 7). In Christian literature, Simon was depicted as a magician who was denounced by the apostle Peter or an arch-heretic who was ultimately responsible for every succeeding school of thought that deviated from the doctrines passed down by the apostles (e.g., Acts 8:9–24; Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 26; 57; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.23.1–4). Beneath these legendary accretions, there appears to have been a memory that Simon and Cerinthus lived during the apostolic era. The latter, at least, began his ministry within the lifetime of John, the Lord's disciple.

The bishop Irenaeus of Lyon regarded himself as a defender of orthodoxy and published a treatise aptly entitled *A Refutation and Overthrow of Knowledge Falsely So Called*, or, more simply, *Against Heresies*, between 170 and 180 CE. For Irenaeus, the 'rule of faith' encapsulated the gist of the apostles' preaching and was handed on to the bishops, the approved successors of the apostles (*Against Heresies* 3.3.1). Irenaeus himself was part of a chain of tradition that stretched back to his own mentor Polycarp, who was in turn instructed by John (3.3.4). Perhaps Polycarp was the anonymous presbyter who informed Irenaeus about Cerinthus's aberrant cosmology (Hill 2000, 155–57; contra Myllykoski 2005, 230). Irrespective of the identity of Irenaeus's informant(s), Irenaeus outlined Cerinthus's theological worldview in *Against Heresies* 1.26.1 as follows:

> *And a certain Cerinthus, then, in Asia taught that the world was not made by the Supreme God but by a certain Power highly separated and far removed from that Principality who transcended the universe and which is ignorant of the one who is above all, God. He suggested that Jesus was not born of a virgin (because that seemed to him impossible), but that he was the son of Joseph and Mary in the same way as all other men [and women] but he was more versed in righteousness, prudence and wisdom than other men [and women]. And after his baptism, Christ descended upon him from that Principality that is above all in the form of a dove. And then he proclaimed the unknown Father and performed miracles. But at last Christ flew away again from Jesus; Jesus suffered and rose again while Christ remained impassible, being a spiritual being. (Klijn and Reinink 1973, 103, 105)*

In Irenaeus's perception, Cerinthus fit the profile of a typical advocate of esoteric 'knowledge' (*gnōsis*), which consisted of the theory that the physical cosmos was formed by a lesser divine being rather than by a supremely transcendent and spiritual deity. Likeminded thinkers often called the creator of the world the 'demiurge' or 'artisan.' Moreover, the noun 'Christ' no longer designated a messianic candidate who had been 'anointed' for a particular office, but, for thinkers like Cerinthus, denoted an aeon or a spiritual emanation from the supreme god (Hill 2000, 152; Hällström and Skarsaune 2007, 491; Kok 2019, 38). From this point of view, an ordinary, virtuous human named Jesus was chosen at his baptism to be possessed by a celestial emissary and he was empowered to reveal the unknown heavenly 'father.' Furthermore, Cerinthus may have taken the metaphysical notion that impassibility is a characteristic marker of divinity for granted, meaning that divine beings are incapable of undergoing change or suffering,

which may be why he reasoned that the Christ aeon had to leave Jesus before he underwent an excruciatingly painful death (Hengel 1989, 60).

Subsequent Patristic writers built on the foundation laid by Irenaeus when referring to Cerinthus. For instance, there is a synopsis of Cerinthus's ideas in the *Refutation of All Heresies* by a Roman ecclesiastical leader who is commonly identified as the early third-century presbyter Hippolytus. It mainly reproduced Irenaeus's summary about Cerinthus, except that it added that the creative 'power' was 'angelic' and that Cerinthus was trained in Egypt (7.33.1–3; 10.21.1–3). The latter notice was probably due to the author's assumption that Cerinthus, like other Alexandrian teachers such as Basilides and Valentinus, was influenced by Greek philosophical concepts circulating in Egypt (Bardy 1921, 350–51; Klijn and Reinink 1973, 4; Brown 1982, 767; Markschies 1998, 59–60; Myllykoski 2005, 233). Later Patristic writers (e.g., Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against All Heresies* 3.2; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 28.1.2; Philastrius, *On Heresies* 36.1) specified that Cerinthus reckoned that angels created the universe, though it is likely they were revising Irenaeus's vague description of an undefined 'power' (Klijn and Reinink 1973, 6–7; Brown 1982, 768; Pétrement 1984, 307; Myllykoski 2005, 216; Hällström and Skarsaune 2007, 490).

The Sources on Cerinthus's Eschatology and Praxis

The Christian intellectuals Gaius of Rome and Dionysius of Alexandria painted a different picture of Cerinthus, and their testimonies were preserved by the fourth-century church historian Eusebius. Eusebius respected Gaius as a learned 'ecclesiastical man' and dated the publication of Gaius's lost *Dialogue with Proclus* to the time of Zephyrinus, the bishop of Rome between 199 and 217 (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.25.6; 6.20.3). Gaius's interlocutor, Proclus, was a spokesperson for the 'New Prophecy,' a charismatic movement that originated with the prophet Montanus and the prophetesses Priscilla and Maximilla in the province of Phrygia in Asia Minor. Gaius's digression on Cerinthus's millenarian fantasies was part of his case against the Montanists' eschatological enthusiasm, but Eusebius extracted his remarks from their original literary context and cited them in *Ecclesiastical History* 3.28.2 as follows:

> *But Cerinthus also, by means of revelations, said to be written by a great apostle, brings before us miraculous things in a deceitful way, saying that they were revealed to angels. And he says that after the resurrection the kingdom of Christ will be set up on earth, and that in Jerusalem the body will again serve as the instrument of desires and pleasures. And since he is an enemy of the divine Scriptures and sets out to deceive, he says that there will be a marriage feast lasting a thousand years. (Klijn and Reinink 1973, 141)*

Based on this quote, it appears that Gaius doubted the authenticity of the Apocalypse of John (cf. Revelation 1:1) because it problematically served as the inspiration for eschatological enthusiasts in general and Cerinthus's musings about the millennium in particular. However, the linguistic and thematic parallels with the Lamb's wedding supper in Revelation 19:9 and the millennium in Revelation 20:1–6 are not precise, so the alternative possibility is that Gaius charged Cerinthus with falsely ascribing some other apocalyptic tract to an unnamed apostle (Brent 1995, 134–36; Manor 2016, 76–79; cf. Theodoret, *Compendium of Heretical Falsehoods* 3.3). On the other hand, Dionysius, the third-century bishop of Alexandria, surely had the book of Revelation in mind when he responded to the gossip that Cerinthus had

a hand in its composition (cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.25.2).

Dionysius's excursus on Revelation in his publication *On the Promises* was prompted by another dispute over eschatology (cf. *Ecclesiastical History* 7.24.1–9). In this instance, Dionysius met with Christian leaders in the district of Arsinoe to resolve the church schisms there that began with a recently deceased Egyptian bishop named Nepos. Nepos had caused controversy by his insistence that Revelation 20:1–6 should be construed in a 'Jewish manner,' meaning that the passage depicts the reign of the Messiah during a literal millennium, and that a literalistic interpretation should be applied to biblical prophecy in a work entitled *Refutation of the Allegorists* (7.24.1–2). Yet Nepos had his critics, and in all probability it was in the context of this conflict that 'certain people' denigrated Revelation as a forgery by Cerinthus (7.25.2). Dionysius re-affirmed that Revelation was written by a holy person named John, even if he was not convinced that this person was an apostle (cf. 7.25.7), and allowed that this seemingly incomprehensible apocalyptic text could be useful when interpreted through an allegorical lens (7.25.4–5). Even so, Dionysius deemed Nepos's thought to be within the realm of orthodoxy, which was more than he could grant to Cerinthus's millenarian ideas that are recorded by Eusebius in *Ecclesiastical History* 3.28.4–5 and 7.25.3 as follows:

> *For the doctrine which he [Cerinthus] taught is this: that the kingdom of Christ will be an earthly one. And he dreamt that it would consist in these things he himself was devoted to, because he was a lover of the body and altogether carnal, namely in the delights of the belly and of the sexual passion, that is to say in eating and drinking and marrying, and—because of this he thought he could provide himself with a better reputation—in festivals and sacrifices and the slaying of victims. (Klijn and Reinink 1973, 143, 149)*

Dionysius went into greater detail than Gaius about how Cerinthus envisioned that physical sensations such as eating, drinking, and sexual activity would continue in the millennium. There is one feature of Dionysius's testimony that is completely unparalleled, namely that Cerinthus predicted that the Jewish sacrificial system would resume during the millennium. This implied the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple that the Romans destroyed in 70 CE and, thus, Cerinthus's eschatology may have been aligned with certain Jewish eschatological hopes (Skarsaune 1987, 408; Hill 2000, 148–49, 164–67; Hällström and Skarsaune 2007, 493). On the other hand, Dionysius may have caricatured Cerinthus's reading of biblical prophecy as excessively carnal, which functioned as a foil for Dionysius's spiritualising method of exegesis (Markschies 1998, 60; Myllykoski 2005, 241).

Epiphanius, the bishop of Salamis, is the last key source to consider as he compiled his *Panarion* or 'treasure-chest' of remedies for 80 heresies between 374 and 377 CE. In his entry on Cerinthus, he initially summarised Irenaeus's main points (*Panarion* 28.1.5–7). Then, he maintained that Cerinthus, before moving to Asia Minor (28.2.6), opposed James (28.2.3; cf. Acts 15:24), Peter (28.2.5; cf. Acts 11:3), and Paul (28.4.1; cf. Acts 21:28; Galatians 2:3) in Jerusalem and Antioch on the question of whether non-Jewish Christian men had to be circumcised. According to Epiphanius, Cerinthus stressed the necessity of obeying the Law of Moses to receive salvation (28.4.5; cf. Acts 15:1), found a proof-text in Matthew's Gospel to justify why Jesus's students need to be circumcised to imitate their teacher (28.5.1–2; cf. Matthew 10:25), repudiated Paul's Law-free gospel (28.5.3; cf. Galatians 5:2, 4), and denied the individual resurrection of Christ before the final resurrection of all believers (6.1–8; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:12–56). This last point contradicts Irenaeus's statement that Cerinthus acknowledged Jesus's bodily resurrection (Myllykoski

2005, 219). Despite that, some of Epiphanius's information about Cerinthus may complement the earlier sources, for it is plausible that Cerinthus promoted traditional Jewish practices alongside traditional Jewish conceptions about an earthly messianic kingdom and the general resurrection of the dead (Wurm 1904, 21–30; Daniélou 1964, 68; Skarsaune 1987, 409).

Modern scholars, however, generally judge Epiphanius to be a less than reliable source with regards to fairly or accurately representing opposing positions, so the anecdotes that he introduced about Cerinthus compelling non-Jews to adopt Jewish customs should be treated with suspicion. Epiphanius did not draw this information from Gaius of Rome or Dionysius of Alexandria because he appears to have been unaware of Cerinthus's millenarian hopes (Hill 2000, 148; Kok 2019, 44). We do have multiple Patristic reports about Jewish followers of Jesus labelled as Ebionites or 'poor ones' who affirmed the permanent validity of the Law of Moses and abhorred the apostle Paul. Since Irenaeus had previously connected Cerinthus to the Ebionites because they shared Cerinthus's view that Jesus was a mere human who was possessed by a divine spirit at his baptism (cf. *Against Heresies* 1.26.2), Epiphanius may have felt free to attribute additional Ebionite stances to Cerinthus (Bardy 1921, 369–70; Brown 1982, 768; Pétrement 1984, 307; Markschies 1998, 62; Hill 2000, 147–48; Myllykoski 2005, 219; Kok 2019, 44). Then, he filled in the gaps of Cerinthus's biography with details from the book of Acts (Bardy 1921, 369–70; Klijn and Reinink 1973, 9–10; Brown 1982, 768; Pétrement 1984, 307; Hill 2000, 147–48; Myllykoski 2005, 219; Kok 2019, 44). As for why Epiphanius brought Paul's epistle to the Corinthians into the discussion, he may have heard that some contemporary Christians in Asia Minor performed baptisms for the dead, a ritual mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:29 (Klijn and Reinink 1973, 12; cf. *Panarion* 28.6.4), or confused the term 'Cerinthians' (i.e., followers of Cerinthus) with 'Corinthians' (Pétrement 1984, 309–10). In the end, Epiphanius wondered why Cerinthus denied the creator's goodness while upholding the creator's laws (28.2.1–2), but it was his forced harmonisation of disparate sources that resulted in this muddled account.

Reconstructing Cerinthus's Cosmology and Eschatology

The divergent reports about Cerinthus make it difficult to ascertain his actual beliefs and practices. However, many scholars find it implausible that Cerinthus depreciated the physical world as the product of an ignorant demiurge, yet anticipated its radical transformation during the millennium. Some scholars suspect that the real target of Gaius's polemic was the book of Revelation, which he brought into disrepute by attaching it to Cerinthus (Klijn and Reinink 1973, 5; Brown 1982, 770; Pétrement 1984, 306; DeConick 2016, 259). By doing so, Gaius invented the portrait of Cerinthus as a millenarian. This argument could be strengthened if Gaius was Dionysius's source concerning the attitudes of 'certain people' toward Cerinthus and Revelation (Bardy 1921, 361; Klijn and Reinink 1973, 8; Smith Jr. 1979, 190; Brown 1982, 768n10; Hällström and Skarsaune 2007, 492n16).

To evaluate this position, it is important to review the reception of Revelation in the second century. At one end of the spectrum, the ascription of Revelation to the apostle John was an established tradition by the middle of the second century (cf. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 81.4). At the other end, Gaius of Rome and Dionysius of Alexandria were cognizant of the rumour that Cerinthus penned Revelation, unless Gaius was thinking about another apocalyptic text. What complicates matters is that Epiphanius documented the existence of a sect in the late second century CE that not only rejected Revelation but also the Gospel of John as forgeries by Cerinthus (*Panarion* 51.3.6). Epiphanius bestowed the nickname

Alogi on this sect because of their rejection of the *logos* (word) in John's Gospel (*Panarion* 51.3.1–3). In the preface to the *Commentary on the Apocalypse* by Dionysius bar Salibi, the twelfth-century Syrian bishop of Amid, the *Alogi*'s accusations were put on the lips of Gaius and the 'blessed Hippolytus' rebutted Gaius's errors. Dionysius bar Salibi also reiterated that Cerinthus advocated for the circumcision of non-Jews, but he may have just followed Epiphanius on this point (Klijn and Reinink 1973, 6, 18; Brent 1995, 162–69; Markschies 1998, 66; Hill 2000, 145–46; Myllykoski 2005, 218; Manor 2016, 112). If Hippolytus reacted against Gaius's efforts to devalue these Johannine writings, this could account for the titles *Heads against Gaius* and *Defence on behalf of the Apocalypse and the Gospel of John* listed in a catalogue of Hippolytus's works put together by Ebed-Jesu (ca. 1298 CE) and *Concerning the Gospel according to John and the Apocalypse* inscribed on a statue re-dedicated to Hippolytus.

Some historians rely on this evidence to contend that Gaius, in the heat of his battle with Proclus, deprecated the Gospel of John and the Apocalypse of John because these writings held special authority for the Montanists (e.g., Smith Jr. 1979). Other scholars have challenged this reconstruction of Gaius's aims (e.g., Brent 1995, 133–84; Manor 2016). There could be a few different ways to construe the data. First, Hippolytus may have presumed that Gaius spread the lie that Cerinthus forged both the Gospel and Apocalypse of John in his quest to defend these books (Bardy 1921, 356–58, 258–60n1, 261n1; Klijn and Reinink 1973, 4–6, 7–8; Smith Jr. 1979, 170, 324–27, 333; Brown 1982, 768; Hengel 1989, 183n38; Markschies 1998, 59–60; Myllykoski 2005, 217, 237–38). Second, there may have been an earlier anti-Montanist writer who claimed that Cerinthus composed the Gospel of John and the Apocalypse of John, but Gaius restricted this charge to pertain solely to Revelation's fraudulent authorship (Schwartz 1914, 213–14). Third, there may have been an older debate about whether the Fourth Gospel should be attributed to the apostle John or to Cerinthus, so the bathhouse story recited by Irenaeus may have been an attempt to distance Cerinthus from the evangelist John, but Gaius extended the charge by including Revelation among Cerinthus's forgeries (Pétrement 1984, 305–6; DeConick 2016, 159). Fourth, Gaius disapproved of an unknown apocalyptic text touted by Cerinthus, but Epiphanius mistakenly deduced that Revelation, along with all of John's literary corpus, were discredited as Cerinthian forgeries, and the medieval Syriac sources were influenced by Epiphanius rather than Hippolytus (Brent 1995, 140; Manor 2016, 68, 117, 130–42).

At the very least, we can be certain that Gaius of Rome and Dionysius of Alexandria asserted that Cerinthus had an apocalyptic text in his possession that justified his millenarian dreams. Instead of viewing Dionysius as dependent on Gaius's *Dialogue with Proclus*, they may supply independent, multiple attestation for a rumour about Cerinthus that had spread as far as Rome and Egypt (Skarsaune 1987, 408; Brent 1995, 136; Markschies 1998, 74; Hill 2000, 148–49; Myllykoski 2005, 242; Hällström and Skarsaune 2007, 493; Manor 2016, 81; Kok 2019, 43). The rumour about Cerinthus's authorship of an apocalyptic work, which was feasibly the book of Revelation, would have been more persuasive if it was already well-known that Cerinthus had stirred up excitement about the millennium. After all, millenarianism was popular in Cerinthus's region of Asia Minor ever since the text of Revelation was distributed to seven Christian congregations there (Daniélou 1964, 68–69; Markschies 1998, 74). Irenaeus may have not bothered to recount Cerinthus's eschatological outlook because it was not objectionable to him (Daniélou 1964, 384; Skarsaune 1987, 408; Myllykoski 2005, 242–43), for elsewhere Irenaeus recorded the Lord's prophecy about the abundant fertility of the earth during the millennium (cf. *Against Heresies* 5.33.3).

If Gaius and Dionysius were right about Cerinthus's eschatology, perhaps Irenaeus was wrong about

Cerinthus's cosmology. It is true that Irenaeus was more familiar with the school of Valentinus, which had a highly developed cosmogonic myth about what lead up to the creation of the world by a foolish demiurge. Irenaeus may have pictured Cerinthus as Valentinus's predecessor, holding the same basic theology in a simpler, more archaic form, and may have inferred that Cerinthus separated the supreme god from the demiurge based on Cerinthus's distinction between the human Jesus and the divine Christ (Wurm 1904, 34–37; Bardy 1921, 345, 345–50; Klijn and Reinink 1973, 4; Skarsaune 1987, 408; Myllykoski 2005, 226, 233–36). Even those who accept Irenaeus's testimony admit he had little first-hand knowledge about Cerinthus (Brown 1982, 767). Then again, Irenaeus's account is consistent with the earliest evidence that we have in the *Epistle of the Apostles*, especially given how it associates Cerinthus with Simon, and Irenaeus was capable of making subtle distinctions between Cerinthus and later 'Gnostics' (Brown 1982, 766, 769; Pétrement 1984, 305; Hengel 1989, 184n38; Hill 2000, 150–54; Hällström and Skarsaune 2007, 488, 492).

There are two recent hypotheses for how to reconcile the testimonies of Irenaeus on the one hand and Gaius and Dionysius on the other. The first one turns to Marcion of Sinope, a slightly later theologian than Cerinthus, who famously distinguished Jesus's heavenly father from the demiurge and equated the demiurge with the god of Israel. Marcion permitted that the demiurge would restore the Jewish people to their land and re-establish their temple sacrificial system (cf. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 3.21; 4.6). Cerinthus may have set the precedent for Marcion in envisioning that the Jewish people would inherit an earthly empire during the millennium as promised by the demiurge, while salvation for the followers of the Christ aeon would consist of a disembodied state of existence in the spiritual realm of the supreme god (Hill 2000, 160–62; cf. Hällström and Skarsaune 2007, 494). The weakness of this hypothesis is that there is no hint from Gaius or Dionysius that the Jewish people would be the sole heirs of Jesus's millennial kingdom (Myllykoski 2005; Kok 2019, 57).

A second hypothesis is that Cerinthus was wrestling with how an immutable deity could be involved in the act of creation, so he posited that the universe was formed through a divine intermediary agent, but he conceived of the relationship between the supreme god and the demiurge in complementary rather than antagonistic terms (Fossum 1985, 16, 215–16; Markschies 1998, 57, 72–73; Kok 2019, 37, 43–44). There was ample Jewish and Christian precedent for the participation of a divine intermediary agent in the creation of the cosmos (e.g., Genesis 1:26; Proverbs 3:19; 8:27–30; *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:22; Philo, *On the Special Laws* 1.81; John 1:3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2). Even if Cerinthus speculated about the role of angels in the act of creation, he may have construed their creative activity positively, just as angels had a positive function in mediating the law that was given to Moses (Wurm 1904, 32–34; cf. Jubilees 2.1; Philo, *On Dreams* 1.143; Acts 7:38, 53; Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 2:2). The key point is that Cerinthus's demiurge was not malevolent and Irenaeus may have exaggerated the demiurge's ignorance. If this is the case, there would be no contradiction for Cerinthus to believe that it was the will of the supreme god for the world to be created by a divine intermediary agent, for the material creation to be restored to the paradisiacal conditions that it had in the beginning, and for the elect to enter into an everlasting state of existence freed from the constraints of materiality after this transitory millennial period. Indeed, this may be how Cerinthus read Revelation, where the millennium precedes the unveiling of the new heavens and earth.

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