



A.D. 70: Preterism's Prophetic Dead End

By Dr. Randall Price

In recent years a system of interpreting biblical prophecy known as Preterism has invaded the church, bringing confusion and division to many congregations that have historically held to the future return of Jesus Christ.

Promoted by popular radio teachers, such as Reformed scholar R. C. Sproul, whose book *The Last Days According to Jesus* advances the moderate preterist position, Preterism has made inroads into evangelical seminaries and stimulated public debates on Bible college campuses. Although most Christians have never heard of the teachings of Preterism, its approach to prophecy diminishes the prophetic hope of the church while undermining the basis of the prophetic promises for Israel.

What Is Preterism?

Derived from the latin word preter ("past"), Preterism holds that most, if not all, of

the prophetic events of the Old and New Testaments have already been fulfilled. Like historicism, which interprets the book of Revelation as symbolic of church history, Preterism spiritualizes prophecy to make it fit historical events in the Church Age. However, unlike historicism, Preterism seeks to fit certain, if not all, prophecies relating to Christ's Second Coming and Israel's restoration into a specific historical event in the past.

As moderate preterist Kenneth I. Gentry, Jr., explains, "Matthew 24:1–34 (and parallels) in the Olivet Discourse was fulfilled in the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In Revelation, most of the prophecies before Revelation 20 find fulfillment in the fall of Jerusalem."¹

Preterists contend that Jesus' use of the phrase *this generation* in His Olivet Discourse requires fulfillment in the first century; R. C. Sproul, in particular, argues that Christ's words failed unless this interpretation is adopted.

By contrast, Futurism (what we believe) maintains that the literal fulfillment of Messianic prophecy in Christ's First Advent confirms that His prophetic teaching must also be interpreted literally. Thus the Olivet Discourse and the Revelation will find fulfillment in the future, particularly during the Tribulation and Christ's Millennial reign.

Two types of Preterism today contend with each other for primacy. Partial, or Moderate, Preterism is the most popular version. Although it argues that most prophecy (such as the events of the Tribulation) was fulfilled in A.D. 70, it still understands that some prophetic teachings, like Christ's second Coming and the bodily resurrection, have a future fulfillment.

Partial Preterism, therefore, holds to two second Comings: one that occurred in A.D. 70 as a parousia (Greek, "coming" or "advent") and Day of the Lord for the purpose of judging the Jewish nation and one that will occur universally at the climax of human history as the final and ultimate Day of the Lord.

Leading advocates of Partial Preterism who have published popular defenses of their position include R. C. Sproul, Gary DeMar, and Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., as well as the late David Chilton, who changed to Full Preterism after his books were published.

Full, or extreme, Preterism contends that all prophecy (including Christ's Second Coming and bodily resurrection) was fulfilled by A.D. 70.

Full Preterism maintains that believers have been spiritually resurrected and the creation spiritually restored, so the church presently exists in the eternal state of the new heavens and new earth.

According to Thomas Ice, executive director of the Pre-Trib Research Center and one of the foremost experts on Preterism, there is no evidence of any preterist interpretation in the history of the early church through the Reformation.²

Preterism's View of Israel

Preterism teaches that Christ came in A.D. 70 to judge Israel and end the Jewish age.

Like historicists, preterists argue that the promises made to Israel were misunderstood as national promises. Therefore, when Israel rejected Christ, these "spiritual" promises passed to the church, the "true Israel."

Preterism, however, which forces the fulfillment of most prophetic texts, particularly the fall of Jerusalem and the Temple, into the events of the First Jewish Revolt, views the destruction of the Jewish people as the central focus of prophecy.

As preterist David Chilton stated,

The Book of Revelation is not about the second coming of Christ. It is about the destruction of Israel and Christ's victory over His enemies in the establishment of the New Covenant temple....Revelation prophesies the judgment of God on apostate Israel; and while it does briefly point to events beyond its immediate concerns, that is done merely as a "wrap-up," to show that the ungodly will never prevail against Christ's Kingdom.³

For preterists, the Jewish people are the true enemies of Christ; and their overthrow by the Roman army, sent by Christ to do His bidding, is the triumph of Christ over Antichrist. In fact, they say, Christ came spiritually in the judgment by the Roman army (hence, a judgment-coming), fulfilling His promise "to come quickly."

The Jewish Temple is likewise seen as the center of spiritual apostasy and its destruction as the fulfillment of the abomination of desolation, which was God's holy judgment for the wicked crucifixion of Christ by the Jews.

Preterists, therefore, reject any aspect of a future for ethnic Israel (apart from the church) and contend that any eschatological system that looks for a restoration of Israel and its Temple is heretical, for such would be tantamount to rejecting Christ and restoring blasphemy.

Preterist Gary DeMar explains:

There is nothing in Jesus' teaching in this Gospel [Matthew] which suggests that after this period of judgment there will be a restoration....The Apocalyptic Discourse (ch. 24) moves away from Jerusalem....Does the Bible, especially the New Testament, predict that the temple will be rebuilt? It does not....To make the temple of stone a permanent structure in the light of Jesus' atoning work would be a denial of the Messiah and His redemptive mission.⁴

Preterism's Problems

(1) The Date of the Book of Revelation

For the prophecies of Revelation to fit into the Roman conquest of Jerusalem, it is necessary to date the composition of the book before A.D. 70.

Preterists understand the necessity of dating the book early in Nero's reign (A.D. 64–67), confessing, "If the book was written after A.D. 70, then its contents manifestly do not refer to events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem."⁵

However, if dating the book was so crucial to its interpretation, why did not the apostle John clearly indicate somewhere in its 404 verses the time of its writing?

However, as Mark Hitchcock, who wrote a doctoral dissertation on the subject, concluded, "I do believe that the case for the late date (A.D. 95) can be proven at least by a preponderance of the evidence, if not beyond a reasonable doubt."⁶

This evidence includes the external testimony of the most reliable early church fathers, such as Irenaeus (A.D. 120–202), who made the unambiguous declaration, "For if it were necessary that the name of him [Antichrist] should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been told by him who saw the apocalyptic vision. For it [the Revelation] was seen no long time ago, but almost in our generation, toward the end of Domitian's reign."⁷

In addition, the internal evidence favors the late date in the time of Domitian. This support includes (1) the condition and description of the seven churches in Revelation 1—3, which make no mention of Paul's missionary journeys; (2) John's banishment to Patmos, rather than execution, as with Peter and Paul under Nero; and (3) the prophecy of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:9—22:5), which implies that the old Jerusalem has already been destroyed.

(2) Lack of Historical Agreement With First-Century Fulfillment

If Preterism's interpretation of prophecy were correct, the historical record should support details. However, the opposite is the case.

For example, the direction of Christ's advent to Jerusalem (Mt. 24:27) is compared with lightning flashing from east to west. But the Roman army, which preterists interpret as fulfilling this prophecy, advanced on Jerusalem from west to east. even if we take this simply to mean the Roman army advanced "like lightning" (i.e., quickly), history reveals a very slow assault on Jerusalem; the war lasted several years before Jerusalem was even besieged!

In many cases a "correlation" can only be made through the eschatologically biased interpretation of first-century historian Flavius Josephus, such as (1) associating divine signs with the Roman army's impending conquest; (2) reinterpreting the text to fit the preferred historical data, such as taking "the clouds of heaven" as the dust kicked up by the Roman army's advance; or (3) taking statements that do not fit the historical events, such as the unprecedented and unsurpassed nature of the Tribulation, as hyperbole in order to claim first-century fulfillment.

Even the central concept of Preterism—that Christ's judgment-coming was to end the Jewish nation—cannot stand in light of Judaism's continued vitality and the modern State of Israel.

The historical consequences for Israel in the aftermath of A.D. 70 were indeed critical. But the Jewish people and Jewish nationalism not only survived, but hope for the restoration promised by the prophets increased. Moreover, the "Temple consciousness," perpetuated through rabbinic Judaism's spiritual transference to the synagogue, also expressed itself in tangible ways.

Whenever circumstances favored rebuilding the Temple, there were Jewish activists who returned to Jerusalem to attempt it. Today the Roman empire is long vanished; but the Jewish people are again in the Promised land, in control of the Holy City and its Temple Mount, and making plans to rebuild the Temple.

Is it reasonable to accept the events of A.D. 70 as a fulfillment of God's program for the Jews but not accept these subsequent events as also part of His ongoing divine plan? A futurist interpretation agrees much better with Jesus' statement in the Olivet Discourse that, when He comes, the Jewish people are to "look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near" (Lk. 21:28). Clearly this text teaches that Christ's Second Coming involves Israel's redemption, not destruction.

As a result of such historical and textual incongruities, Robert Gundry commented concerning the preterist interpretation of a first-century fulfillment:

Whether writing just before, right at, or just after 70 C.E., Mark [or any of the other gospel writers] is not liable to have suffered from very much ignorance of what went on. From beginning to end, then, the events and circumstances of the Jewish war disagree with the text of Mark [also Matthew and, in part, Luke] too widely to allow that text to reflect those events and circumstances.⁸

If the historical correlation with an A.D. 70 fulfillment for the Olivet Discourse fails, and Preterism depends on such a fulfillment for the maintenance of its eschatological system, then Preterism itself fails as a viable eschatological interpretation.

The Dangers of Preterism

Every teaching has consequences for the spiritual life. Therefore, the teachings of Preterism must be considered for their practical dangers.

Preterism teaches that Christ has already returned (spiritually) and, in its extreme form, that He will never return again bodily. However, the divine declaration in Acts 1:11, "This same Jesus...will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven," contradicts both Partial and Full Preterism.

The teaching then is false. It not only distorts the prophetic program and denies the blessed hope (Ti. 2:13) but promotes the deception that there will be no end to history, that evil has been eradicated from the world (Full Preterism), and that believers now live in the eternal state.

Such false doctrine also prevents Christians from obeying the manifold commands of scripture directed to those awaiting Christ's coming (1 Th. 1:10). Practical admonitions given in light of Christ's return—such as “awake...walk [behave] properly” (Rom. 13:11–13; cf. 1 Th. 5:4–10); “live soberly [sensibly], righteously, and godly” (Ti. 2:12); and live in purity (1 Jn. 3:3)—have no meaning to those who believe His coming is past.

Preterism also corrupts the understanding of the present work of Satan and his demons by teaching Satan was crushed and bound at the cross and that apostasy is a thing of the past. Yet Scripture states that our struggle is “against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12); “the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 Jn. 5:19); and “in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1).

How then can Christians obey such commands as “Resist the devil” (Jas. 4:7; cf. 1 Pet. 5:9) and “from such people [apostates] turn away!” (2 Tim. 3:5)?

Moreover, the preterist approach to prophecy affects the way Christians understand God's purpose for the Jewish nation and their political views toward the existence of the modern Jewish state. Preterism replaces Israel with the church, teaching that “ethnic Israel was excommunicated for its apostasy and will never again be God's Kingdom.”⁹

If Israel's future salvation and restoration (Rom. 11:25–27) in God's program is abrogated, so, too, is God's promised blessing for the world (Rom. 11:12) in fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:3).

So, in contrast to the Preterist approach, we say Marantha! Even so, come Lord Jesus.

ENDNOTES

1. Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 159.
2. Thomas Ice, "The History of Preterism," *The End Times Controversy*, ed. Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2003), 42–46.
3. David Chilton, *Paradise Restored: An Eschatology of Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Reconstruction Press, 1985), 43.
4. R. Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church*, 4th ed. (Atlanta: American Vision, 1999), 52, 61.
5. R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 140.
6. Mark Hitchcock, "The Stake in the Heart—The A.D. 95 Date of Revelation," *The End Times Controversy*, 125.
7. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.30.3.
8. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 755.
9. Chilton, 224.



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