

Has Bible Prophecy Already Been Fulfilled? Part V

by Thomas Ice

While I continue our series on preterism (i.e., the belief that prophecy was fulfilled in the past) we will be shifting gears from dealing with key passages from Matthew's Gospel to their interpretation of the Book of Revelation. To those of you who have been following this series, it will come as no surprise to learn that preterists believe that John's Revelation from Jesus Christ has already been fulfilled, as far as preterists are concerned. Why do they take such a strange view?

The Preterist Interpretation

"The closer we get to the year 2000, the farther we get from the events of Revelation," says preterist Ken Gentry. "'Preterism' holds that the bulk of John's prophecies occur in the first century, soon after his writing of them. Though the prophecies were in the future when John wrote and when his original audience read them, they are now in our past."¹ Dr. R. C. Sproul apparently agrees with Dr. Gentry's basic understanding of Revelation as fulfilled prophecy.² In his commentary on Revelation, the late David Chilton, a preterist said,

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. In fact, as we shall see, the word *coming* as used in the Book of Revelation never refers to the Second Coming. 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. But the main focus of Revelation is upon events which were soon to take place."³

As with the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24; Mk. 14; Lk. 21), the preterist view does not view Bible prophecy as "things to come," but rather as "things that came." Why do they come to such an errant conclusion?

Preterist "Timing" Argument

Preterists believe they are driven to a first century fulfillment of Revelation because, like the Olivet Discourse, they believe it says it will be fulfilled soon. What arguments do preterists appeal to in an effort to support their understanding of Revelation?

Dr. Gentry begins his argument for a first century fulfillment of Revelation by noting its similarity to the Olivet Discourse.

It is an interesting fact noted by a number of commentators that John's Gospel is the only Gospel that does not contain the Olivet Discourse, and that it would seem John's Revelation served as His exposition of the Discourse.⁴

If, as seems likely, Revelation is indeed John's exposition of the Olivet Discourse, we must remember that in the delivery of the Discourse the Lord emphasized that it focused on Israel (Matt. 24:1,2, 15-16; cf. Matt. 23:32ff.) and was to occur in His generation (Matt. 24:34).⁵

Thus, since preterists believe that there is a parallel between what is taught in the Olivet Discourse and Revelation (I agree that both refer to the same events), they naturally would have to believe that Revelation was fulfilled in the first century (I disagree that either

has been fulfilled).

“One of the most helpful interpretive clues in Revelation is . . . the contemporary expectation of the author regarding the fulfillment of the prophecies. John clearly expects the soon fulfillment of his prophecy,”⁶ says Dr. Gentry. Preterist Gary DeMar has collected what he calls the “time texts” in Revelation, which lead him to believe that the fulfillment of the Apocalypse had to occur during the first century. These are:

- 1) The events “must *shortly* (*táchos*) take place.” (1:1).
- 2) “For the time is *near*.” (*eggús*) (1:3).
- 3) “I am coming to you *quickly* (*tachús*).” (2:16).
- 4) “I am coming *quickly* (*tachús*).” (3:11).
- 5) “The third woe is coming *quickly* (*tachús*).” (11:14).
- 6) “The things which must *shortly* (*táchos*) take place.” (22:6).
- 7) “Behold, I am coming *quickly* (*tachús*).” (22:7).
- 8) “For the time is *near*.” (*eggús*) (22:10).
- 9) “Behold, I am coming *quickly* (*tachús*).” (22:12).
- 10) “Yes, I am coming *quickly* (*tachús*).” (22:20).⁷

It appears presumptuous at the outset of the interpretative process that these verses are labeled “time texts” by DeMar. The timing of a passage is determined by taking into account all factors in a given passage. I hope to show that these terms are more properly interpreted as *qualitative indicators* (not chronological indicators) describing how Christ will return. How will He return? It will be “quickly” or “suddenly.”

Without a doubt, the exegetical survival of the preterist position revolves around the meaning of these passages. When they arrive at passages which do not appear to harmonize with their view, if taken plainly, they commonly revert to their “timing” passages and say, “What ever this passage means, we have already established that it had to be fulfilled within the first century.” In accordance with this belief, they search first century “newspapers” for an event that comprises the closest fit to the passage and usually cite it as a fulfillment of the biblical text in discussion.

Preterist Theme of Revelation

Revelation 1:7 says, “Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. Even so. Amen.” This passage is often recognized as the theme verse of Revelation. Preterists believe that “Revelation’s main focus of attention (though not its only point) is this: God will soon judge the first-century Jews for rejecting and crucifying his Son, their Messiah,”⁸ notes Dr. Gentry. “John states his theme in his introduction at Revelation 1:7,” Dr. Gentry continues, “just after he declares the nearness of the events (1:1,3), a theme that is directly relevant to the first-century circumstances.”⁹ Not surprisingly, Dr. Gentry believes that “in its contextual setting verse 7 points to the destruction of Jerusalem and her temple in A.D. 70.”¹⁰ Preterists do not believe that this verse speaks of Christ Second Coming, instead they see it as another reference to the A.D. 70 destruction. Thus, in usual fashion, preterists turn the perspective of Revelation 1:7 from a global to a local perspective, from a Gentile to a Jewish outlook, and from a future to a past fulfillment. All these are reversals of its actual meaning.

As with the Olivet Discourse, when one sifts through the details of Revelation it is clear that preterism fails to prove its claims when compared with the totality of Scripture. Preterists attempt to work their exegetical voodoo on the Book of Revelation as they have

done with the Olivet Discourse.

Rebuttal of Preterist Interpretation

Over the next few installments I will be dissecting the above stated preterist approach to Revelation. After that is completed, I will provide reasons why the Bible teaches that the events of Revelation, which include the tribulation, second coming, and millennium are yet future events. But first, in the remainder of this article I will deal with their false understanding of Revelation 1:7.

Revelation 1:7

As noted above, Preterists believe that Revelation 1:7 speaks of only the land of Israel and was local. On the other hand, if it refers to Gentiles and is global, then their view is impossible and it has to be future. We can analyze the passage by dividing it into the following four interpretive elements: 1) Christ's "coming," 2) "with the clouds," 3) "every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him;" and 4) "all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him." Since I will be doing a whole article next month on the meaning of Christ's "coming with the clouds," I will defer commenting on these first two elements until then. However, I, like almost all interpreters of Scripture before me believe it to be a clear reference to the bodily, personal return of Christ at a yet future time. This is supported by the final two items in the passage. Items number three and four include clear allusions to Zechariah 12:10-14.

3) "every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him:"

This element plays a key role in determining whether this passage has a global or local intent. The first part of this element "every eye will see Him" does not appear in the Old Testament reference. The other element, "even those who pierced Him" is the part from Zechariah. It is clear that those who pierced Him in Zechariah are a reference to the Jewish people. On this, both preterist and futurist would agree. The debate arises over whether "every eye" is a reference to just the Jewish nation (the preterist contention) or to the people of the whole earth (the futurist understanding). The way to resolve who is intended in the scope of the reference can be seen by comparing it to the subset "even those who pierced Him." If the larger group of "every eye" refers to the Jewish nation, then it does not make sense that the smaller group "even those who pierced Him," would be a reference to the same exact people, as preterists contend. Their reading of the passage would be as follows: "every eye (Israel) will see Him, even those who pierced Him (Israel)." There would be no need of have a sub-group if both mean the same thing. If "every eye" refers to all the peoples of the world as the larger group, then the qualifying phrase "even those who pierced Him" would be emphasizing the Jewish element as the smaller sub-group. Thus, it is not surprising that virtually everyone, other than preterists, take this element of this passage in a global sense. It appears that bias, not the clear meaning of the text is the only reason the preterist takes this part of the passage in a restricted manner.

4) "all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him:"

The Greek word for "earth" can refer to either the "earth," as in "heavens and earth" (Gen. 1:1), or "land," as in the "land of Israel" (1 Sam. 13:19). The problem with taking this to refer to the land of Israel is that every other usage of the exact phrase "all the tribes of the earth" in the original language always has a universal nuance (Gen. 12:3; 28:14; Ps.

72:17; Zech. 14:17). This supports our futurist interpretation.

Conclusion

Preterists have to restrict the meaning of clear universal language in the Bible in order to make their system appear to work. However, as we are demonstrating, they have to time after time force the biblical text into such a meaning. Revelation 1:7 is another example of a passage that speaks of the global scope of God's future judgment upon mankind. I will continue dealing with these items in future issues.

Endnotes

1. Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., "A Preterist View of Revelation" in C. Marvin Pate, ed., *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), p. 37.
2. See R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According To Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 131-49; 179-89; 200-03.
3. David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), p. 43.
4. Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), p. 130.
5. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell*, p. 131.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
7. Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness* (Atlanta: American Vision, 1997), pp. 344-45. Numbers and Greek transliteration added.
8. Gentry, "A Preterist View of Revelation," p. 46.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*