

ANSWERING PRETERISM:  
DID JESUS RETURN IN A.D. 70?

by

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## Introduction

Interpreting Biblical material related to the second coming, rapture, millennium, and final judgment is a difficult and complex task. Such interpretation demands knowledge not only of the relevant Biblical material, but also of how different systems of eschatology interpret this material, of hermeneutics in general, and of ancient history. Recently the already crowded field of eschatological interpretations has seen the resurgence in popularity of a lesser known interpretation. A large amount of printed material, web sites, and newsgroups seek to remedy what its proponents perceive as the major flaw in eschatological interpretation: futurism. Futurism is the view that the majority of the book of Revelation, the second coming, rapture, millennium, and final judgment are all future events. This position is called preterism, and its proponents believe that all or most of these prophesied events happened in the first century, in the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70. Preterism is also known as Realized Eschatology because its proponents believe that all (or nearly all) the events prophesied in the Bible have been fulfilled. Preterism is becoming more popular partially because it answers critics of Christianity when they claim that Jesus was a false prophet because he did not return in the first century.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper we will examine what preterists teach, some of the differences among preterists, and what responses can be made to their interpretations. Is this a peripheral doctrine about which Bible-believing Christians may disagree, or is it a more serious disagreement that strikes at the heart both of what it means to be a Christian and the future hopes of Christians?<sup>2</sup> Or should we agree with John Noë that preterism is the only Biblical response to liberal attacks on Scripture and Christianity?<sup>3</sup> Certainly dispensationalists will strongly disagree with how

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<sup>1</sup>R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 12-5; Richard White, "Preterism and the Orthodox Doctrine of Christ's Parousia: A Constructive Critique of M. R. King," (MA thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1988), 2.

<sup>2</sup>As the Spiritual Council of Sacramento Covenant Reformed Church of the Reformed Church in the USA believes. Their position was adopted in March 1997. See [http://www.preteristarchive.com/CriticalArticles/anathema\\_reformed-usa\\_01.html](http://www.preteristarchive.com/CriticalArticles/anathema_reformed-usa_01.html). See Sproul, *Last Days*, 153-6 for some differences among various preterist groups regarding the resurrection.

<sup>3</sup>John Noë, *Dead in their Tracks: Stopping the Liberal/Skeptic Attack on the Bible* (Bradford, PA: International Preterist Association, 2001), 1; Donald Hochner, *Part Two - Greek: Geneva*, [http://www.preteristarchive.com/Preterism/hochner-donald\\_p\\_02.html](http://www.preteristarchive.com/Preterism/hochner-donald_p_02.html):2002. See also David Palm, "The Signs of His Coming: An Examination of the Olivet Discourse From a Preterist Perspective," (MA thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1993), 1-2.

preterists interpret Scripture.<sup>4</sup> As a preliminary summary, it would be fair to say that preterists take Jesus' words in the Olivet Discourse about when he would return literally, but then "spiritualize" the resurrection, second coming, final judgment and many other doctrines while many futurists reverse the process! Preterism as a system is difficult to critique because as a system it is fairly coherent. For those familiar with Ladd's realized eschatology, preterism could be summarized as spiritualized realized eschatology between A.D. 33 and 70 rather than realized eschatology being the entire church age.<sup>5</sup>

### The Foundation of Preterism

Preterism takes Jesus' words in Matt 23:34-36, 24:2, 3, 33-35 (and Synoptic parallels) in a straightforward manner.<sup>6</sup> Preterists claim that doing so leads directly to the understanding that Jesus returned in A.D. 70. Jesus' words appear straightforward, and this is how the preterists interpret them:

(23:34-36) Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation. (NIV)

Jesus' statement indicates that the generation then living (τὴν γενεάν ταύτην) would see the fulfillment of his prediction. This phrase is repeated in 24:34 and Jesus links the fulfillment of his words to his credibility both in 23:36 ("I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation") and in 24:34, 35 ("I tell you the truth, this generation {Or race} will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away").<sup>7</sup> Jesus spoke to the disciples, warning them ahead of time about what would happen to them (Mark 13:29). The Olivet Discourse clearly points to a Judean context in the first century (Matt 24:20; Mark 13:14, 15).<sup>8</sup> Preterists also point to early church fathers who

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<sup>4</sup>Mal Couch, *The Fatal Mistakes of Preterism*, [http://www.conservativeonline.org/articles/preterism/fatal\\_mistakes\\_of\\_preterism.htm](http://www.conservativeonline.org/articles/preterism/fatal_mistakes_of_preterism.htm):2002.

<sup>5</sup>White, "Preterism," 24.

<sup>6</sup>Sproul, *Last Days*, 17.

<sup>7</sup>We will examine later whether γενεά must mean "generation" or whether it can mean "race" as the NIV footnote suggests.

<sup>8</sup>Palm, "Signs," 12-4.

understood that these passages in Matthew refer to the fall of Jerusalem rather than to some future time. Eusebius' words are an example:

These things took place in this manner in the second year of the reign of Vespasian, in accordance with the prophecies of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who by divine power saw them beforehand as if they were already present, and wept and mourned according to the statement of the holy evangelists . . .

The entire foundation of preterism stands on these passages and on understanding them as outlined above. All the rest of their interpretation of the Olivet Discourse, the prophetic and eschatological material in the NT Epistles, and their understanding of the nature and dating of Revelation flow from their understanding of Jesus' words, but are not as central.

Understanding that these predictions refer to the fall of Jerusalem might not be a problem, except that the Second Coming is said to be one of these events (Matt 24:3, 27, 30, 39).<sup>10</sup> The Second Coming is the real sticking point of preterism. Did Jesus come in A.D. 70? Could he have come in A.D. 70? If he did, what kind of coming was it? Among most Christians, the Second Coming is believed to be future. The future Second Coming of Jesus has been the hope of nearly two millennia of Christians and this hope is reflected in creeds and confessions across Christendom. Any biblically supported claim that Jesus has already come must be examined carefully.

One unfamiliar with preterist teachings will immediately object to their claim that the prophecies refer to historical rather than future events. Anyone familiar with the typical Dispensational or more general premillennial views or even amillennialism or postmillennialism will be "pre-conditioned" to look for an end to time/history and this physical planet in prophetic material. The language that most are accustomed to reading appears to support this. For example, in Matt 24:4 the disciples ask about the end of the age, and to our minds "age" appears to connote time. References to "the earth" (Matt 24:29-31) and other world-wide references in Revelation should be understood as referring instead to "the land of Judea" and the people/events of that area.<sup>11</sup> Preterists, however, claim that the aim of prophecy was to show that the OT system was finished in the events surrounding A.D. 70, and that the church was firmly established as God's way of dealing with people rather than predicting the end of history or the material universe. The assumption that the NT prophetic material deals with the future causes many futurists to forget that the material was written to people who lived and died nearly 2000 years ago and it was said to be "soon" in their time. This would indicate that there must have been a fulfillment in their own time or soon thereafter, otherwise the purpose behind its writing would be confused at best. Any far future fulfillment is secondary at most.

Preterists believe that the rest of the NT also points to the immediacy of the Second Coming. For example, Rev 22:7, 12 state that Jesus is coming soon (ταχύ) and examples that

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<sup>9</sup>Eusebius, *Church History*, chapter 7.

<sup>10</sup>Palm, "Signs," 3.

<sup>11</sup>Sproul, *Last Days*, 39 reporting Russell's arguments.

point to the first century expectation of Jesus' soon return could be multiplied.<sup>12</sup> Matt 16:26-28 Jesus describes how he would come in glory with his angels, rewarding everyone, before some of his hearers died. This would indicate a time within the first century for the fulfillment of what Jesus said. Consistent preterists believe that Jesus must have returned in A.D. 70; there are only two comings of Jesus.

Not only were the Second Coming and the end of the age predicted to be within the lifetime of Jesus' hearers. Preterists argue that other events, most particularly, the resurrection and the end of the Old Covenant period were believed to be expected within the lifetimes of the apostles and their readers.<sup>13</sup> Acts 17:3; 1 Peter 4:5; 2 Tim 4:1; and Rev 22:6 are all examples pointing to this understanding.

### The Importance of the Fall of Jerusalem for Preterist Understanding

The importance of the fall of Jerusalem cannot be underestimated for the preterist view. It was the ending of one age and the beginning of another. As indicated in Heb 8:13 the Old Covenant was obsolete and would soon disappear, predictive of the disappearance of the Temple and all the worship and sacrifices associated with it. Furthermore, the fall of Jerusalem was accompanied by the second coming or parousia of Jesus and the resurrection and the final judgment. In short, the fall of Jerusalem ushered in the eternal kingdom of Christ.

There is no scriptural basis for extending the second coming of Christ beyond the fall of Judaism. The physical and spiritual results, and significance of that event fill every need and purpose of the coming of Christ. The destruction of Judaism did not leave unfulfilled one single prophecy, promise, or blessing, the fulfillment of which is dependent upon the end of this present world. . . . the consummation of God's scheme of redemption was not predicated upon the ending of this physical world.<sup>14</sup>

We are, therefore, now in "*eternal days*, world without end."<sup>15</sup> The "last days" were the last days of the Jewish order, the Old Covenant, the time when the Jews persecuted the believing church. Ishmael and Isaac existed together (see below).<sup>16</sup> The old age ("this age" in the NT) is the Jewish age or economy. The age to come is not the future reign of Christ in a millennium or

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<sup>12</sup>Max King, *The Spirit of Prophecy* (Warren, Ohio: Parkman Road Church of Christ, 1983), 101-3, 106-14.

<sup>13</sup>Ward Fenley, *The Resurrection of the Dead Already Happened!*, [http://www.preteristarchive.com/Preterism/fenley-ward\\_da\\_03.html](http://www.preteristarchive.com/Preterism/fenley-ward_da_03.html):2002.

<sup>14</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 105.

<sup>15</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 81.

<sup>16</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 76.

God's eternal reign, but is the current age that began when the Jewish economy ended in A.D. 70. There was a 40 year overlap of these two ages.<sup>17</sup> The church age began, the Jewish age was over. There is no future age for us; we are now in what the NT describes as the future age. In commenting on Zech 14:4, 5 preterists state:

According to this prophecy, whatever stood in the Church's way was going to be removed. Instead of a rough and winding highway over a mountain range (the wearying burden of the corrupted Jewish leadership), the Church would be given a straight and smooth road (the easy yoke of Christ). The Way [sic] of escape and salvation would overcome all that opposed It [sic].<sup>18</sup>

### Ishmael and Isaac: an Extended Allegory

As further justification for their time line, preterists point to the narrative of Ishmael and Isaac. In allegorical fashion, Ishmael represents fleshly Israel that reject Jesus and the Gospel (see also Gal 4:21-31) and Isaac represents those who accept Jesus and the Gospel. Ishmael was born first, then Isaac, but they lived in the same household for some time. This time was full of strife and bickering, and at last the son of the slave woman was cast out. This casting out of Ishmael stands for the casting out of the unbelieving Jewish system in the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup>

### Implications of the Preterist Position

If the preterist position is adopted, then there are further changes in one's understanding of NT doctrines that must also be made. We will examine the more significant doctrines below.

### The Nature of Jesus' Coming

Assuming that Jesus returned in A.D. 70 as indicted above, what kind of coming was this? Was it visible to the entire world? Futurists point to Acts 1:9-11 which describes Jesus as rising until a cloud obscured him from sight. The angels then told his followers that he would return in the same way. Rev 1:7 repeats this image with the addition that "every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him." This seems to indicate that the entire earth will see Jesus when he returns. Matt 24:29-31 contains nearly identical imagery and also states that all the nations of the earth will mourn.

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<sup>17</sup>King, *Cross and Parousia*, 555; White, "Preterism," 53-8.

<sup>18</sup>*Questions, Questions, Questions*, <http://www.strat.o.net/~dagreen/question5.html> note80:2002.

<sup>19</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 30-3.

There will be signs in the heavens at the time of Jesus' coming, the sun will become dark, the moon also, the stars will fall, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. Are we to take these as astronomical events that can be seen, such as comets, meteors, and eclipses, or are these language that the Bible uses to describe significant events in history? Most futurists would say the former, but preterists point to OT language indicating the latter.<sup>20</sup> They point to Isa 13:6-13 which contains similar language, but occurs within the context of judgment on Babylon (13:1) rather than the entire world. Joseph saw visions that predicted his future political power. These visions involved celestial bodies (Gen 37:9-10). Similar imagery is used in Eccl 12:1, 2, symbolizing good times and bad times and in Isa 13:9-13, 34:3-5; Ezek 32:7-15; Amos 5:18, 8:9. Preterists therefore conclude that Jesus' coming was a coming in power and judgment on Jerusalem, but that he was not seen world-wide. We should understand Jesus' return on the clouds as "common prophetic parlance for historical divine judgments on nations."<sup>21</sup> Some preterists<sup>22</sup> do believe that Jesus was seen in the clouds as described by Josephus: "chariots and troops of soldiers in their armor were seen running about among the clouds, and surrounding the cities."<sup>23</sup>

### Jesus' Present Reign

One of the implications of understanding that Jesus returned in A.D. 70 is understanding that Jesus is now reigning and ruling. There will be no future personal reign from Jerusalem as premillennialists believe. Jesus reigns now from the throne of God. Preterists point to Heb 10:12-13 and 1 Cor 15:24-28 to support their understanding.<sup>24</sup>

In its favor, preterism understands that Jesus' work on the cross was so complete and powerful that its effects continue throughout history until all of Jesus' enemies are subdued. But

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<sup>20</sup>Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 94-7, 99-102. It is possible not to be a preterist and still understand these celestial phenomena as figurative of political or historical events. See Mauro, *Seventy Weeks*, 278-82.

<sup>21</sup>C. Marvin Pate, ed. *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 47. Gentry cites Isa 13:1, 9-13, 19:1; Ps 18:7-15, 104:3; Joel 2:1, 2; Mic 1:3-4; King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 107-8.

<sup>22</sup>David Green, *And it Came To Pass - A Review*, [http://www.preteristarchive.com/Preterism/green-david\\_p\\_06.html](http://www.preteristarchive.com/Preterism/green-david_p_06.html):2002.

<sup>23</sup>The Wars of the Jews, Book VI, Ch. V, Sec. 3. Similar statements were made by Tacitus (*Histories* v. 13) and recorded by Eusebius (chapter 8). See also Sproul's selections of Josephus in *Last Days*, 122-7. Compare also Ezek 10:15-19 describing the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

<sup>24</sup>DeMar, *End Times Fiction*, 213; Michael Blume, *When Will Jesus Sit on the Throne?*, [http://www.rightlydividingtheword.com/articles/sit\\_on\\_the\\_throne.htm](http://www.rightlydividingtheword.com/articles/sit_on_the_throne.htm):2002.

this understanding of Jesus' works do not require preterism. Postmillennialism especially would agree with this view. They would claim that the conditions of the kingdom were completely in place at A.D. 70, but continue to work out their implications throughout history, as the stone in Nebuchadnezzar's vision continued to grow (Daniel 2).<sup>25</sup>

### The Judgment of Matthew 25

The separation of the sheep and goat nations in Matthew 25 would seem to mitigate against the preterist view because the judgment passage comes immediately after Jesus' return and appears to refer to the Final Judgement. This separation is instead explained as not relating to the final judgment, but instead as a recapitulation in history of the curses and blessings described in Deuteronomy 27.<sup>26</sup> In Deuteronomy 27 the tribes were divided, with some on Mount Gerizim, and the others on Mount Ebal. In the middle was the ark of the covenant. Blessings would come upon the obedient, and curses upon the disobedient. The specifics of the curses are spelled out.

The Lord will send upon you curses, confusion, and rebuke, in all you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and until you perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken Me. The Lord will make the pestilence cling to you until He has consumed you from the land where you are entering to possess it. The Lord will smite you with consumption and with fever and with inflammation and with fiery heat and with the sword and with blight and with mildew, and they will pursue you until you perish. . . . The Lord shall cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you will go out one way against them, but you will flee seven ways before them, and you will be [an example of] terror to all the kingdoms of the earth. Your carcasses will be food to all birds of the sky and to the beasts of the earth, and there will be no one to frighten [them] away. . . . Your sons and your daughters shall be given to another people, while your eyes look on and yearn for them continually; but there will be nothing you can do. A people whom you do not know shall eat up the produce of your ground and all your labors, and you will never be anything but oppressed and crushed continually. You shall be driven mad by the sight of what you see. . . . The Lord will bring you and your king, whom you set over you, to a nation which neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone. You shall become a horror, a proverb, and a taunt among all the people where the Lord drives you. (20ff)

The latter part of the chapter is even stronger and appears to fit the time of the destruction of Jerusalem.

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<sup>25</sup>Daniel Harden, *When is a Heretic Not a Heretic?*, <http://ourworld.cs.com/preteristabcs/id76.htm>.

<sup>26</sup>Michael Blume, *Jerusalem Missed the Blessing*, [http://www.preteristarchive.com/PartialPreterism/blume-mf\\_pp\\_01.html:2001](http://www.preteristarchive.com/PartialPreterism/blume-mf_pp_01.html:2001).

The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as the eagle swoops down, a nation whose language you shall not understand, a nation of fierce countenance who will have no respect for the old, nor show favor to the young. Moreover, it shall eat the offspring of your herd and the produce of your ground until you are destroyed, who also leaves you no grain, new wine, or oil, nor the increase of your herd or the young of your flock until they have caused you to perish. It shall besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls in which you trusted come down throughout your land, and it shall besiege you in all your towns throughout your land which the Lord your God has given you. Then you shall eat the offspring of your own body, the flesh of your sons and of your daughters whom the Lord your God has given you, during the siege and the distress by which your enemy will oppress you. The man who is refined and very delicate among you shall be hostile toward his brother and toward the wife he cherishes and toward the rest of his children who remain, so that he will not give [even] one of them any of the flesh of his children which he will eat, since he has nothing [else] left, during the siege and the distress by which your enemy will oppress you in all your towns. The refined and delicate woman among you, who would not venture to set the sole of her foot on the ground for delicateness and refinement, shall be hostile toward the husband she cherishes and toward her son and daughter, and toward her afterbirth which issues from between her legs and toward her children whom she bears; for she will eat them secretly for lack of anything [else], during the siege and the distress by which your enemy will oppress you in your towns. (49-57)

The preterist believes that the judgment of the sheep and the goats refers to the fall of Jerusalem in fulfillment of the curses above.

#### Dating the NT Books and Clement

In order to support their system, it is essential that the NT (in particular all of the Gospels and Revelation) was written before the fall of Jerusalem. Most evangelical scholars would see two NT books are candidates for a post A.D. 70 date: Revelation and Hebrews, but reasonable arguments can be made for an origin either side of that date and no hard conclusions can be drawn.<sup>27</sup> Most evangelicals today accept a late first century date for Revelation, which would preclude a full blown preterist view.<sup>28</sup> Preterists therefore focus on establishing an early date for

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<sup>27</sup>D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 398-400, 473-76; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1970), 685, 716-8.

<sup>28</sup>For pre-A.D. 70 dates see David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987); Kenneth Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989); R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988). For a general discussion see C. Marvin Pate, ed. *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids:

Revelation. If any NT books, especially one of the Synoptics or Revelation, can be dated after A.D. 70, then the preterist position is seriously undermined. But even if all the NT books were written before A.D. 70, that does not prove the preterist position; it only supports it.

It is also important that Clement be dated before the fall of Jerusalem. In his letter to the Corinthians, he wrote about the Second Coming coming speedily and being future to the time that he wrote. Again, if he wrote after A.D. 70 then the entire preterist understanding is without foundation because those who knew the apostles and their teaching *continued to look for Jesus' coming after A.D. 70*. We must therefore examine the strengths of the arguments for a pre-A.D. 70 origin for the Epistle of Clement? Clement's letter begins by referring to "the sudden and successive calamitous events which have happened to ourselves." This could refer to either the persecution under Nero or under Domitian. He refers to the martyrdom of Peter and Paul as "in our own generation" and "the most recent spiritual heroes"(chapter 5). But Clement may distinguish between the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul that occurred under Nero and those that he refers to at the beginning of his letter. The latter are "sudden and successive calamitous events" and could refer to a Domitian persecution. But the language is ambiguous and could support either an earlier or later date.<sup>29</sup> In 41:2, Clement refers to the offerings in Jerusalem in the present tense. "Not in every place, brethren, are the daily sacrifices offered, or the peace-offerings, or the sin-offerings and the trespass-offerings, but in Jerusalem only. And even there they are not offered in any place, but only at the altar before the temple, that which is offered being first carefully examined by the high priest and the ministers already mentioned." But this may be merely an historical present tense rather than referring to events that still occurred during Clement's time.<sup>30</sup> Clement also looks for the soon coming of the Lord (23:5): "Of a truth, soon and suddenly shall His will be accomplished, as the Scripture also bears witness, saying, 'Speedily will He come, and will not tarry;' and, 'The Lord shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Holy One, for whom ye look.'" But this is the language of Scripture and could refer to the time of Jesus' coming, whether near at hand or further away. No firm conclusions can be made regarding the date of Clement's letter.

Whichever date one accepts, it is important to note that Clement did not look for a spiritual resurrection, but for a physical. In chapter 24 he refers to sowing the seed and subsequent growth of the plant as a type of the resurrection. In the next chapter, he uses the phoenix as an example of resurrection. The phoenix that rises is a physical successor to the previous one that died. In other words, his understanding of the nature of the resurrection does not agree with the common preterist spiritual view that we will present below. He was also looking forward to the resurrection, which if he wrote after A.D. 70, is very damaging to their view. If he wrote a generation after the Fall of Jerusalem, it shows that the earliest church and those who knew the apostles did not hold a preterist understanding of the resurrection.

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Zondervan, 1998), Sproul, *Last Days*, 141-9.

<sup>29</sup>*Introductory Note to the First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-04.htm>; *St. Clement of Rome*, <http://www.lumenverum.com/fathers/clement.htm>.

<sup>30</sup>See Sproul's comments in *Last Days*, 148.

## Other NT Material

In this next section we will examine how preterists understand the resurrection and the fate of the material universe.

### Resurrection

One of the major NT doctrines that preterists must rework is the resurrection. Both the timing and the nature of the resurrection are understood differently than in historical Christianity. A common view among preterists is that spiritual rather than physical death is the concern of the Bible and so resurrection will also be spiritual. The fact that Adam died spiritually but not physically when he disobeyed proves, they say,<sup>31</sup> that the Bible's concern is with spiritual death/resurrection not physical death/resurrection.<sup>31</sup> The time of Tribulation is also the time of the resurrection (Dan 12:1-2 and Matt 24:21). A further comparison of Dan 12:3 with Matt 13:40-43 shows that Jesus' parable must refer to the same event that Daniel refers to. Both refer to the righteous shining forth as the sun, and by comparison with Jesus' teachings in Matthew 24, we understand that this refers to the fall of Jerusalem.

The last day when the resurrection occurs is not the end of history, but is rather understood as the day dividing the Old Covenant from the New (or the Mosaic Covenant from the Messianic Covenant). Jesus came at the end of the Mosaic Covenant, and with his death ushered in the end of that covenant. The New Covenant then began, but the two covenants overlapped for a period of forty years. At the end of that period the Old Covenant was done away with and the New Covenant revealed as its legitimate successor. As Curtis states in discussing marriage in the age to come (Luke 20:34, 35):

The resurrection was not something that was available to them in 'this age' (the Old Covenant age) but would be available to them in 'that age' (the New Covenant age), implying that the resurrection would occur at the beginning of the New Covenant age. So, the resurrection was to happen at the end of the Jewish age, the Old Covenant age. We know that this happened in AD [sic] 70.<sup>32</sup>

From the timing of the resurrection, we can now understand the nature of the resurrection. There was no physical resurrection in A.D. 70, so the resurrection must have been spiritual. Further preterist support for a spiritual resurrection is found in Paul's description of Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Tim 2:17, 18). If these two had been preaching a physical resurrection, then it would be easy enough to refute them (dig up a grave!). If, however, the resurrection were spiritual in nature, with physical life continuing on as it ever did, then it would not be obvious whether it had occurred or not. Thus some people could believe that it had, and no one could refute them.

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<sup>31</sup>David Curtis, *The Resurrection From the Dead*, [http://www.preteristarchive.com/Preterism/curtis-david\\_p\\_09.html](http://www.preteristarchive.com/Preterism/curtis-david_p_09.html):1999.

<sup>32</sup>Curtis, *Resurrection*.

But the resurrection could not occur until the Temple had been destroyed. King understands the resurrection of 1 Corinthians 15 as spiritual, not physical. He understands the second resurrection of 15:12 and the one in Rom 11:15 to be the same.<sup>33</sup> These are not physical resurrections, but rather resurrections to spiritual life. There was no physical or bodily change at the time referred to in 1 Cor 15:52.<sup>34</sup>

Jesus' resurrection was something of a special case, necessary to show that he had in fact been raised from the dead. It was also necessary to fulfill the Scriptures that he would not decay, something that has not been promised to us. In other words, Jesus' physical resurrection was necessary to prove his spiritual resurrection. For believers the situation is a bit different: "We get the same kind of body Christ has, but we do not get it the same way He got His, nor do we get our same physical body back like Christ did. We get a new spiritual body which arises out of the inner man." "Those of us who have trusted Christ in the New Covenant age, have life and do not need to be resurrected."<sup>35</sup> Again, what is in view is spiritual death and spiritual life, not physical life and the resurrection of the material bodies that we now have.

The resurrection was a one time event in which the Old Testament saints were brought out of Hades and finally overcame death to be with the Lord. We have put on immortality and will put on our immortal body when we die physically. As believers, we live in the presence of God,<sup>36</sup> and in physical death, we simply drop the flesh and dwell only in the spiritual realm.<sup>36</sup>

These quotations show that the understanding of the nature of the resurrection is the most far-reaching of the doctrines that must be changed. There is no physical resurrection, physical rapture, or physical second coming. These are spiritual in nature. Today's believer now lives in the reality of spiritual resurrection. There will be no future resurrection of the body. Thus the title of one essay, "The Rapture: Physical or Spiritual?"<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Max King, *And So All Israel Will Be Saved*, <http://www.livingpresence.org/articles/AndSo.html>: 2001; idem, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 191, 196-7. King explains well that we will receive a spiritual body in the resurrection, but he appears not to see the difference between a body and a spirit. One is material, one is not. Jesus' appearances after the resurrection show that he was material, and not purely spirit, although the form of the material was different than before the resurrection.

<sup>34</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 201-2.

<sup>35</sup>Curtis, *Resurrection*.

<sup>36</sup>Curtis, *Resurrection*.

<sup>37</sup>David Curtis, *The Rapture: Physical or Spiritual?*, [http://www.preteristarchive.com/Preterism/curtis-david\\_p\\_07.html](http://www.preteristarchive.com/Preterism/curtis-david_p_07.html):2002. See Sproul, *Last Days*, 168.

## 2 Peter 3 and the Destruction of the Elements

Second Peter 3:10 refers to the elements (στοιχεῖα) being burned up at the coming of the day of the Lord. This may appear to the reader to be a description of the destruction of the material universe, especially in the context of Peter's previous description of "the present heavens and earth" being reserved for fire (3:7) and his stating that the heavens "will disappear with a roar" (3:10). There will be a new heaven and a new earth (v. 13). But preterists (or many of them) interpret this passage as referring to the passing of the old Jewish order when the city and Temple were destroyed.<sup>38</sup>

Looking at other NT uses of the word στοιχεῖα finds that they refer to the elements of Jewish religion or worldly philosophy (Gal 4:3, 9; Col 2:8, 20-22; Heb 5:12).<sup>39</sup> This assumes, however, that other NT authors' use of the word necessitates that Peter must use the word in the same way. Hochner continues to argue that the Bible nowhere teaches that the physical world will be destroyed. Sin only affected the human race, not the physical world. Preterists argue that the world will not be destroyed, and refer to Ps 104:5 and Eccl 1:4 as supporting this position. This is a troubling passage to use, however, as Ecclesiastes may refer to how things appear from a human perspective, and Psalm 104 is a poetic description of the order that God has placed in the universe. Neither necessitate the preterist position. Hochner also cites God's promise in Gen 8:21 not to curse the ground or destroy all life as he did in the Flood. Yet v. 22 states that God's order in the world will continue "as long as the earth endures" (v. 22). God's statements in 9:11, 15 specifically describe the focus of the promise in 8:21. It is clearly a promise not to destroy the world *in a flood*, and says nothing about destroying it again in any other way. Hochner examines the word "new" that is used in 2 Pet 3:13. The word used is καινός rather than νέος. He argues that since καινός refers to new in quality but not time, Peter cannot be speaking of a completely new heaven and earth. If God destroyed the world and created another, then that would be νέος not καινός. In response we should see that the same event can be seen as new in *either* time or quality without negating the newness in the other respect.<sup>40</sup> Peter's argument stresses the need for righteousness which will characterize the new heaven and earth, but says nothing about whether the new heaven and earth are new in time.

Hochner also examines the "new heavens and earth" passage in Isaiah 65 and 66 and notes that death will be present, that people will build, harvest, and evangelize. In other words, life will continue as it is now even while the new heavens and earth exist. This means that "The new heavens and earth is referring to the eternal state while we live in the physical [sic] realm in earthly bodies; it must be referring to a period in human history. This is the period of the

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<sup>38</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 42.

<sup>39</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 131-3; Donald Hochner, *Part Four - Greek: Stoicheia*, [http://www.preteristarchive.com/Preterism/hochner-donald\\_p\\_04.html](http://www.preteristarchive.com/Preterism/hochner-donald_p_04.html):2002.

<sup>40</sup>Richard C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 219-25.

Kingdom of God which Christ rules in the hearts of the believers.”<sup>41</sup> But there are adequate explanations of why these images occur in a passage that futurists believe belong either to the millennium or the eternal state, and Hochner does not deal with these explanations.

### Different Preterist Views

Preterists are not in complete agreement. There are two major groups of preterists. Those described above are full or complete preterists. There is another group that is best described as partial preterists. They do not believe that all the events of the future were fulfilled at the events surrounding A.D. 70. Several events, usually understood to be the second coming, the resurrection, and the final judgment are still future.<sup>42</sup> This understanding avoids the problem of spiritualizing all these events. There are also several views regarding the resurrection.

### Critique of Preterism

In the following section we will examine preterist arguments and whether they adequately interpret the relevant Biblical material.

#### “This Generation”

Must γενεά mean “generation” or can it mean “race” as the NIV footnote of Matt 24:34 suggests? This is no small matter, as the entire edifice of preterism falls or stands with the understanding of the meaning of the word. We must also point out that the phrase “this generation” is probably not a technical term that must carry the same meaning each and every it is used.<sup>43</sup> Each context must determine the meaning of the phrase.

Four interpretations of the phrase “this generation” are commonly put forward. The first is that it refers to those who were alive in Jesus’ day.<sup>44</sup> The second is that it refers to “this race” or Israel. The third is that it refers to the unbelieving quality of those who heard and rejected Jesus, and therefore refers properly to anyone who also hears and rejects him, whether Jew or

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<sup>41</sup>Hochner, *Stoicheia*.

<sup>42</sup>Pate, *Revelation*, 85-6; Sproul, *Last Days*, 24; DeMar, *End Times Fiction*, 212.

<sup>43</sup>Mike Stallard, *A Review of R. C. Sproul’s The Last Days According to Jesus: An Analysis of Moderate Preterism*, [http://www.conservativeonline.org/articles/preterism/review-last\\_days\\_according\\_to\\_Jesus\\_frm.htm:2002](http://www.conservativeonline.org/articles/preterism/review-last_days_according_to_Jesus_frm.htm:2002).

<sup>44</sup>R. Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1982) 111-5.

Gentile.<sup>45</sup> Nelson points out that the Hebrew word **דור** often refers to the nature of the people (Ps 12:8, 14:5). This is especially true with two groups of people: those at the time of the Flood, and the wilderness generation.<sup>46</sup> Jesus stated that “this generation” murdered Zechariah and would be accountable for it (Matt 23:35). Jesus’ point is that there will always be unbelievers and those who reject him.<sup>47</sup> In this interpretation, the fall of Jerusalem would have to be one judgment of many to befall the wicked, and a foretaste of the judgment that would finally befall them. The problem with this third view is that Jesus said that all the righteous blood would come on this generation, and then immediately laments Jerusalem (Matt 23:35-37). “This generation” is said to fill up the sins of their forefathers (Matt 23:32) and thus they may be said to have killed Zechariah. Jesus is answering a question of “when.” The fourth view is that it refers to those who are alive when these events take place. Once these events begin, they will take place within a generation. Given the rest of the Discourse, this is unlikely. The setting is Judea.<sup>48</sup>

We must first admit that when Jesus uses the phrase in Matthew it refers to the unbelieving people that were listening (the first view).<sup>49</sup> For example in Matt 11:16-24, 12:39-42, 17:17 Jesus decries the lack of faith and wickedness of “this generation.” Why should we believe that it means something different in Matthew 23 and 24? Luke 17:25 records that Jesus must be rejected by “this generation,” which refers to those who heard and rejected him. While Hochner claims that the judgment of 12:39-42 referring to “this generation” must have occurred in the first century, this timing is not necessary.<sup>50</sup> All that is required is that whenever the judgment occurs these two groups face each other. The judgment could occur at almost any point in history during or after the first century and still fulfill the details of this passage.

The second view (that **γενεά** means Israel as a race as in the NIV footnote) does not fit the rest of the uses in the Synoptics and Acts. These uses<sup>51</sup> always refer to the people of Jesus’ day, and always in a negative fashion. They are condemned because they do not believe, they do not accept Jesus and his person and message. They are evil, and because they do not accept Jesus, and forcibly reject him, they will be held accountable for the blood of all the righteous people of the OT. **γενεά** does not refer to the race of Jews, but rather to Jesus’ unbelieving

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<sup>45</sup>Nelson, “This Generation,” 381.

<sup>46</sup>Nelson, “This Generation,” 374.

<sup>47</sup>See Sproul’s explanation in *Last Days*, 57-9; Palm, “Signs,” 19.

<sup>48</sup>A popular Dispensational view. See however, Palm, “Signs,” 22-3.

<sup>49</sup>Palm, “Signs,” 21-2.

<sup>50</sup>Hochner, *Genea*.

<sup>51</sup>Matt 11:16, 12:41-45, 23:36, 24:34; Mark 8:12, 8:38, 13:30; Luke 7:31, 11:29-32, 50, 51, 17:25, 21:32; Acts 2:40

contemporaries. The first view outlined above is the best understanding of the phrase “this generation .”

### The Nature of Jesus’ Return

We must acknowledge that the language used in the Olivet Discourse is poetic and reminiscent of OT prophecies regarding the destruction of Babylon and Edom (Isa 13:9-13, 34:3-5). This might point to a non-literal coming. The statement of the angels in Acts 1 would seem to indicate, however, that Jesus’ return was to be more than poetic or invisible. Jesus was literally with them, he would literally return. They could see him before he left, they would see him when he returned.<sup>52</sup> The preterist treatment of the topic does not appear to adequately deal with Acts 1. So although preterists claim that Jesus’ coming was not observable by the senses,<sup>53</sup> this runs counter to the plain sense of Acts 1.

In response, preterists maintain that the coming of the Lord in judgment in the OT is described in similar terms to Matt 24:30. Isa 19:1 is cited, but the difference is that the Lord is said to come on a cloud, but it is not said that he will be seen, which is an obvious conclusion from Acts 1:11; Matt 24:30; and Rev 1:7. In Matthew Jesus said “they will see the Son of Man coming” (24:27). Rev 1:7 states that those who pierced him will see, in fact “every eye will see him.”

Preterists, however, make an excellent point when they point to OT use of imagery that appears to foretell the destruction of the material universe. Thus, the sun’s darkening, the falling of the stars and the shaking of the heavenly bodies as described in Mark 13:24, 25 and parallels are a quotation from Isa 13:10, 34:4. The former quotation for Isaiah refers to the Day of Yahweh in judgment against Babylon. The second occurs in a passage about judgment against Edom. This imagery is often used elsewhere in the OT in connection with God’s salvation of his people and in connection with the judgment of his enemies.<sup>54</sup> David describes his deliverance by God in Psalm 18 in similar theophany language. We conclude that OT authors routinely used cosmic upheaval language in describing historical events such as the Exodus and the fall of Babylon and Edom. In the OT God promises judgment against Israel and Jerusalem and describes it as if the material world itself were to end (Deut 32:22; Jer 4:23, 24; Ezek 7:1-6).<sup>55</sup>

Preterists believe that instead of referring to the material world, the shaking of the heavenly bodies (NIV) should be understood as referring to significant changes in the spiritual realm. The text actually reads “powers” (δυνάμεις) rather than bodies in Mark 13:25 and may be reflected in Heb 12:25-29 and Eph 6:12. The fall of Jerusalem brought in a new spiritual

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<sup>52</sup>Sproul, *Last Days*, 46.

<sup>53</sup>See White’s description in “Preterism,” 13.

<sup>54</sup>See Judges 5:4, 5, 20; Ps 68:7, 8; Nah 1:2-16; Mic 1:3-4; Ezek 32:7, 8. Palm, “Signs,” 53-9.

<sup>55</sup>Palm, “Signs,” 61-2.

order. So far this is not a problem; the problem is Mark 13:26, 27. In what way can Jesus be said to have come in the events that surrounded the fall of Jerusalem? Is A.D. 70 the second coming, or only a coming in judgment?

Jesus' words in Mark 13:26 are derived from Dan 7:13-15. In Daniel, the one like a Son of Man approaches the Ancient of Days on the clouds of heaven. The Son of Man receives an eternal kingdom and authority and power over all peoples. Opinions differ as to whether the Son of Man represents the saints or is an individual. The latter appears to be the most likely, although v. 22 does state the saints would take possession of the kingdom. Still, the scene is an enthronement scene that includes the vindication of the saints after their persecution by the little horn. The Son of Man receives the kingdom as its superior and on behalf of the saints. It is important to note that there is an ascent of the Son of Man to the throne of God, rather than a descent of the Son of Man to earth.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps the coming in Mark 13:26, 27 refers not to a return to earth, but is rather an indication that Jesus has come to the Father, vindicating Jesus before Israel.

Some other details in the discourse need to be discussed. First, Jesus refers to the sign of the Son of Man appearing in heaven (Matt 24:30). It is not clear whether the sign is something that refers to the Son of Man or whether the sign is the Son of Man himself coming.<sup>57</sup> In favor of the former is that Josephus records several events that happened before the fall of Jerusalem that could be interpreted as signs. These included the opening of the inner court gate on its own and a star that looked like a sword (or perhaps a cross).<sup>58</sup> Tacitus also reported battles in the skies and a godlike voice.<sup>59</sup>

Second, it is also not clear whether "in heaven" goes with "appears" or "the Son of Man." The word order would suggest the latter, with a translation such as "and then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven." This may indicate that there would be a sign that the Son of Man was in heaven. The sign that Jesus was in heaven would be that Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed.<sup>60</sup> What of the nations of the earth who mourn that are mentioned in v. 30? This phrase is better translated "all the tribes of the land shall mourn," referring not to the entire earth, but to those living in and near Judea.

Third, is the identity of the angels who gather the elect. In this preterist interpretation, the gathering of the elect is to be understood as the gospel reaching out to the ends of the earth by Jesus' messengers (ἄγγελοι). Although the trumpet call is often used in eschatological scenarios, it does not have to be used here. The trumpet was used at the gathering of God's

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<sup>56</sup>Palm, "Signs," 112-4, 141-2.

<sup>57</sup>Palm, "Signs," 117.

<sup>58</sup>Josephus, *Wars* 6.289, 293-300.

<sup>59</sup>Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.13.

<sup>60</sup>Palm, "Signs," 120-1.

people.<sup>61</sup> Coming here at the end of the passage, the gathering of the elect must refer to the preaching of the gospel throughout the church age.

That the Olivet Discourse through Mark 13:27 deals with the fall of Jerusalem is summarized in Jesus' parable of the fig tree. Just as the leafing of the fig tree points to the soon coming of the summer, the signs that Jesus had predicted earlier point to the soon fulfillment of the destruction of the temple (which is what the disciples had asked about). One more time Jesus predicted the time frame of his prophecy. It would be within one generation. Jesus staked his reputation on the fulfillment of his words. *Everything to this point* would happen within about forty years.

### The Sheep and the Goats

The preterist interpretation (see above) of Matt 25:31-46, the separation of the sheep and goats, appears promising at first sight. On further reflection, however, it is not as strong. First, the punishments and rewards of *all* the nations are eternal: punishment with weeping and gnashing of teeth, on the one hand, and eternal life on the other. Second, if the preterist scenario were true, then the judgment was against Israel alone; no other nation was judged and no one seems to have been rewarded. Although Jews often persecuted Christians during this period, the Romans did as well. Why should Israel as a nation have been judged more severely than Rome? By A.D. 70 Rome under Nero had persecuted Christians, killing many. Using the criteria of judgment found in Matthew 25 Rome herself should have been judged, yet history shows that she was the instrument of judgment on Israel and survived for many centuries. The preterist interpretation does not seem to measure up to the language of the passage.

### Did Jesus Intend His Listeners to Understand That He Would Return in A.D. 70?

As we saw above, the foundation of preterism is that Jesus himself taught that he would return and judge Jerusalem and unbelieving Judaism within the lifetime of those alive. There are, however, indications in Jesus' teachings that A.D. 70 was not the total fulfillment of all prophetic events, nor was it the time of his return.

One, Jesus taught in John 6:40, 43, 54 that everyone that believes in him would be raised at the last day. If this took place in A.D. 70, then those who believed after that date would not be raised at the last day. Two, if the final judgment took place in A.D. 70, then there is no "last day" where judgment takes place. All who live after that date are judged as they die. Thus there is no "last" or "final" judgment. King admits this, "Perhaps the greatest error in man's concept of the *last* or *final* judgment is the belief that this is the *end* of all judgment."<sup>62</sup> But if there can be more judgments after the last one, then why can there not be more comings after the

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<sup>61</sup>Palm, "Signs," 126-8. See the texts he mentions.

<sup>62</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 155.

second?<sup>63</sup> Three, Jesus' promise is two-fold. First he promises eternal life, second he promises resurrection at the last day. If the latter is not exactly as he stated, then perhaps our understanding of the first needs modification as well. Jesus speaks several times of the "day of judgment" (Matt 11:24). This is one day, the day of the resurrection and judgment, called the "last day" (John 6:39-54, 11:24, 12:48).<sup>64</sup> The preterists, however, cannot believe in one day (or occasion) of resurrection and judgment, because the bulk of humanity has lived after A.D. 70, not before! Yet the Bible teaches that judgment must affect all human beings, as Paul stated in Acts 17:31 and as Jesus made plain in Matt 12:41, 42. In the preterist view, judgment must occur as people die, but this is not what Christianity has historically understood, nor is it in accord with the teachings of the NT.

Four, Luke refers to Jerusalem being trampled down until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (21:24). This appears to initiate a break between the time of the Great Tribulation around A.D. 70 and a future time. This latter time would be in the distant future.<sup>65</sup> Five, in Mark's account (13:23, 24), there appears to be a division between the Tribulation time culminating in Jerusalem's destruction, and those days after the Tribulation.<sup>66</sup>

Six, although Jesus said in Matt 23:36 that all the blood of the righteous would be required of "this generation," and in 24:34 that "this generation" would not pass away until these things had happened, his statement in Matt 23:39 ([NIV] "For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'") seems to point beyond A.D. 70 to a time when Israel responds to him in faith, rather than being the recipient of judgment as in A.D. 70.<sup>67</sup> If there was a Second Coming of Jesus at A.D. 70 and those who judged him saw him, then his statement in 23:39 could not be true. Similarly, if they did not actually see him, then his statement could not be true.<sup>68</sup> His coming had to have been visible. This is one indication in the passage that Jesus separates his coming from the destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>69</sup>

Seven, Matthew's use of *εὐθὺς* in 24:29 may prove not to support preterism. For example the wheat in Matt 13:5 springs up "immediately". However wheat must germinate, a process that takes some time. What is meant is that the next event of importance in the narrative is the sprouting of the wheat. This may also be the best interpretation of the occasion when Jesus called the disciples. "Immediately they left their nets and followed Him" (4:20). Did the

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<sup>63</sup>See more on this point below.

<sup>64</sup>D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 292.

<sup>65</sup>Mauro, *Seventy Weeks*, 272-3.

<sup>66</sup>Mauro, *Seventy Weeks*, 271.

<sup>67</sup>Stallard, *The Last Days*.

<sup>68</sup>Mauro, *Seventy Weeks*, 210.

<sup>69</sup>Nelson, "This Generation," 372.

disciples drop their nets where they were, or did they fold and store them, and then follow Jesus? If the latter, then what Matthew means by “immediately” is that the next item of interest in the narrative is that the disciples followed Jesus.<sup>70</sup> This does not work in Matt 8:3, 14:31, 20:34, 26:49, 74, 27:48 but might in 14:22, 21:2, 25:15, 16. While there might be an idea of urgency in Matthew’s use, it might be a temporal urgency or an eschatological urgency, rather than demanding that these events follow right after.<sup>71</sup>

Eight, Jesus specifically mentions Daniel’s prophecy (Matt 24:15) which Jesus said would come within the lifetime of the generation of his disciples. This prophecy would end badly for Israel (Dan 12:1), as opposed to Zechariah’s prophecy (Zech 14:1-5; Joel 3:9-16) where the Lord would fight for Israel and things would go well for Israel. This was a warning for the disciples not to expect that good things would come in A.D. 70.<sup>72</sup> Specifically, the Lord would not fight for Israel, but against her.

Nine, Jesus’ discourse was designed to warn the disciples of the difficulties that they would face and the need they would have to be watchful. Signs are given relative to the destruction of Jerusalem, but none for the return of Christ. The only sign that would be given for that was the return of Christ himself (Matt 24:36ff).

Ten, Max King argues that the NT teaches that the coming of the Lord was “at hand.” He references 2 Thess 2:2, which however, reads “that the day of the Lord has come,” using the perfect tense of ἐνίστημι. Paul was rejecting the teaching that the day of the Lord was already a reality when he wrote the letter. King also points to Jam 5:8, which he quotes as saying that the coming of the Lord is *at hand*, as if the two passages referred to the same reality.<sup>73</sup> But the Greek in Jam 5:8 uses the perfect tense of ἐγγίζω, “to draw near.” Jesus used the same verb and tense when he stated that the kingdom of God had drawn near (Mark 1:15). While admitting that it is difficult to deal with the problem of imminence in the NT, Moo’s statement is important to keep in mind:

But what is crucial is to understand this “nearness” in the appropriate temporal framework: salvation history. With the death and resurrection of Jesus and pouring out of the Spirit, the “last days” have been inaugurated. This final age of salvation will find its climax in the return of Christ in glory. But — and here is the crucial point — the length of this age is unknown. Not even Jesus knew how long the “last days” would last

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<sup>70</sup>Similarly, Carson, *Matthew, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. F. E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 507.

<sup>71</sup>Jesus’ words in Matt 24:29, if understood as referring to historical-political events rather than celestial, would seem to have been fulfilled after A.D. 70. The Roman Empire would never again know the peace and stability after that date as it had before Nero’s reign. Thus the change began shortly after A.D. 70, i.e., immediately. Mauro, *Seventy Weeks*, 280-3. The signs that Jesus predicted were fulfilled in the decade before Jerusalem fell. See Palm, “Signs,” 81-3.

<sup>72</sup>Mauro, *Seventy Weeks*, 211.

<sup>73</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 114.

(cf. Mark 13:32). What this means is that the return of Christ, as the next event in the salvation-historical time-table, is, from the time of the early church to our own day, “near,” or “imminent.”<sup>74</sup>

Lastly, in relation to Jesus’ second coming, we must also ask whether King’s assertion that the age that began when Christ returned would last forever. This age may itself have “a plurality of successive and progressive ages,” as shown in Eph 2:7 where Paul refers to “the ages to come” (τοῖς αἰώσιν τοῖς ἐπερχομένοις). Furthermore, in 1 Cor 10:11 Paul refers to the old age in the plural.<sup>75</sup>

That Jesus is now reigning over the universe is plainly taught in the NT, as in Jesus’ statement in Matt 28:18, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Eph 1:20-23 and the two passages addressed above also teach that Jesus is currently reigning. This reign is obviously a spiritual, but real, reign. This current reign does not automatically preclude or demand some future “literal” reign here on the earth.

We must also mention that not all preterists believe that Jesus returned in A.D. 70 as his final coming. DeMar distinguishes between a coming of Jesus in A.D. 70 for judgment on unbelieving Israel, and the second coming to judge the world which is associated with the resurrection.<sup>76</sup> DeMar links Jesus’ statement about his return in Matt 24:30 with the coming of the Son of Man in Dan 7:13 where the Son of Man’s coming is described as his ascent to God’s presence and his subsequent enthronement.<sup>77</sup> DeMar states that the sign of Jesus’ coming (Matt 24:30) was Jesus’ ascension to God’s presence as described in Acts 1. His coming in A.D. 70 was not the second coming, but a coming in judgment on Israel. In DeMar’s understanding the second coming is still future, although this is not the main preterist view.

## The Resurrection

Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor 15:24-28 indicates that death’s destruction was still future to his time, and from our knowledge of this life, it would seem that its destruction yet remains. Unless one understands that Paul teaches the destruction of spiritual death, then physical death must be what Paul has in mind. Understanding Paul’s statements as implying spiritual death cannot be meant either, because unsaved people die every day, separated from God. Nor does Rev 21:4 not appear to have been fulfilled. Death still exists, and there is still plenty of heartache in this life, probably just as much as there was before A.D. 70. It simply will not do to say that the old order that has passed away is Judaism (see below), for the sacrificial system and the rest of the

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<sup>74</sup>Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 224.

<sup>75</sup>White, “Preterism,” 63-5.

<sup>76</sup>DeMar, *End Times Fiction*, 213.

<sup>77</sup>DeMar, *End Times Fiction*, 103-5.

OT system (see Heb 8:13) are simply not in view in Revelation 21. What *is* in view are the results of sin: death, the curse, pain, futility (Rom 8:20, 21), and the other heartaches of this life. These are in effect as much now as they were before A.D. 70. Nor can we state that Rev 21:7, 8 refer to the absence of the evil people in the church for a cursory glance through church history shows how false such a claim would be.

The preterist view of the nature of the resurrection is its most serious departure from historical Christianity and needs serious critique. Paul's arguments in Romans 8 underscore the importance of the resurrection of the physical body. In 8:11 he promises that just as the Holy Spirit lives in us, God will give life to our mortal bodies (τὰ θνητὰ σώματα ὑμῶν). This is repeated in v. 23 where Paul looks forward to the of redemption of our bodies, our adoption as sons! *There is no completion of salvation until the resurrection of the body.* Both body and soul need to be redeemed. Now, it is certain that Paul wrote this before the fall of Jerusalem, so it could be argued that what was future for him is past for us. But we must notice that the nature of the resurrection and its timing are intertwined. Preterists are forced to understand the resurrection as spiritual because there is no evidence known to us to support a physical resurrection in A.D. 70. In fact history argues against a physical resurrection in A.D. 70, as many Christians lived from A.D. 60 (roughly the time Paul wrote Romans) until well after A.D. 70 without being resurrected or physically changed! This argues against the preterist understanding of the nature of the resurrection body, which then casts doubt on its timing. Preterist claims that the resurrected body is spiritual—unseen and untouchable—are unlikely in the light of 1 Corinthians 15 and inherently unverifiable and unfalsifiable. Furthermore, the understanding of many preterists of the resurrection body sounds more like a disembodied spirit than a body.<sup>78</sup> That there is a resurrection *body* is further taught in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul teaches that the new body will be like the old, but different, as the seed is like the plant, but different. There is a difference between earthly and heavenly bodies (15:40-44), but they are bodies. The body *that died* will be raised. It will be different, but there is a continuity between the two bodies that many preterists deny.<sup>79</sup> There is no hint in 1 Corinthians 15 of a spiritual resurrection. The entire passage deals with the resurrection of the body, and without that bodily resurrection the whole of Christianity is cast into doubt. King's equation of 1 Cor 15:12 and Rom 11:15 simply will not do.<sup>80</sup> Although King claims that 1 Cor 15:51, 52 refer to the transfer into the eternal kingdom of God in A.D. 70, this ignores the context of vv. 50-56.<sup>81</sup> Paul specifically refers to "flesh and blood," "the dead," and "perishable." He speaks of being "changed," and "sleep." The contrast is to "imperishable" and "not sleeping." Mortality is

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<sup>78</sup>Sproul, *Last Days*, 164. There are a wider variety of opinions on this subject that I had first thought. Some are closer to historical Christianity, others include the view above, and some believe that at the resurrection believers will become part of the body of Christ in a mystical union.

<sup>79</sup>Sproul, *Last Days*, 163.

<sup>80</sup>King, *All Israel*.

<sup>81</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 201-2.

changed into immortality. Death's sting is gone. It is hard to imagine that this passage does not refer to physical death and physical resurrection.

Paul connects the resurrection with the return of Jesus in 1 Thess 4:13-18. Preterists also join these two events with the fall of Jerusalem. As we saw above, however, we do not need to link these two events with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. There may be a break in the Olivet Discourse at Mark 13:32 so that Mark 13:32-37 may refer to the return of Jesus as a separate event from A.D. 70.<sup>82</sup> This is developed below.

### Does "Ages" Refer to the Jewish Order?

Preterists argue that many of the references to the world refer to the Jewish order rather than to the material world. For example, King argues that the reference in Ps 102:25, 26 is to the Jewish order, rather than the material world.<sup>83</sup> Yet this ignores the context of vv. 23-28 where David laments his short years, contrasts it with the earth's greater age, and yet shows how God's "age" is greater and he will remain even though the world wears out. The context, therefore, points to understanding the "world" as the material world rather than as the Jewish world.

In discussing the change from the previous age to the present in A.D. 70, King states: "the Church would be given a straight and smooth road (the easy yoke of Christ). The Way [sic] of escape and salvation would overcome all that opposed It [sic]."<sup>84</sup> But we must wonder whether Jewish persecution before A.D. 70 was worse than what the church experienced later under Roman emperors or today experiences in persecution around the world. The first few centuries of church history should indicate that there was no "straight and smooth road" for Christians. Did A.D. 70 usher in the new heavens and the new earth and do away with hardship and suffering? I daresay that there was as much suffering and hardship for Christians after that date as before.<sup>85</sup> While the temptation to return to Judaism for all practical purposes was no longer present, nothing else about the "road" appears easy.

King maintains that the Bible is concerned with the history of God's dealings with humanity (covenant history) and not with "natural" or "profane" history.<sup>86</sup> While it is true that the Bible is primarily concerned with covenant history, are God's concerns limited to that one history, or do they find fulfillment in the reconciliation of the world to his rule and his public vindication before the entire world and created order?

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<sup>82</sup>This is developed below.

<sup>83</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 184.

<sup>84</sup>*Questions, Questions, Questions*, <http://www.strat.o.net/~dagreen/question5.html> note80:2002.

<sup>85</sup>Contra King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 148-9.

<sup>86</sup>King, *Cross and Parousia*, 82-3; White, "Preterism," 55.

## Revelation

If the book of Revelation is primarily concerned with the events in Judea and Jerusalem, then why was the first part directed to seven churches in Asia Minor? Why would the seven churches be concerned with the events that would occur one thousand miles away and not affect them? Although Gentry points out that the events in Judea would affect the entire empire, it does seem strange that the letters are addressed to Asia Minor rather than to churches in or nearer Judea.<sup>87</sup> Why are the following references in Revelation? They all refer to world-wide events or ones that are exterior to Judea and Jerusalem.

First, in Revelation 5 we see that God's redemption has reached people from "every tribe and language and people and nation" (v. 9 and 7:9) and that "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them" praises God (v. 13). The authority of the beast similarly is world wide (13:7, 8). In chapter 7 we read of the four angels at the four corners of the earth. The concern here appears to be world-wide rather than limited to one geographical location. Similarly, the trumpet plagues appear to be world-wide rather than limited to one area, in particular Judea. There is a fair amount of concern with the sea, which is not that important a feature for Judean geography. The earthquake of chapter 16 affects not only the great city, but also the "cities of the nations" (v. 19). The great white throne judgment of chapter 20 takes in all of humanity. The new heavens, earth, and Jerusalem all point to a reversal of the Fall in Genesis. This is God's vindication before creation. It is his (more than) restoration of what humanity lost. The perspective is wider than the Fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, even if that event ushered in the church in its fulness.

## The Witness of Church History

We must also look at church history. Did the early Christians understand that these events fulfilled all the prophecies of Jesus and the OT? Did they understand that the second coming, resurrection, and judgment had already occurred or did the early church still await them? As mentioned above, Clement could support either side depending on when he wrote. The Didache uses language highly suggestive of a future (literal?) fulfillment for the events of the Olivet Discourse.<sup>88</sup>

For in the last days {the false prophets} and corrupters shall be multiplied, and the sheep shall be turned into wolves, and love shall be turned into hate. For as lawlessness increaseth, {they shall hate one another and shall persecute and betray. And then} the world-deceiver {shall appear} as a son of God; {and shall work signs and wonders,} and the earth shall be delivered into his hands; and he shall do unholy things, which have never been since the world began. Then all created mankind shall come to the fire of

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<sup>87</sup>Pate, *Revelation*, 49.

<sup>88</sup>16:6-17

testing, and many shall be offended and perish; {but they that endure} in their faith {shall be saved} by the Curse Himself. {And then shall the signs} of the truth {appear;} first a sign of a rift in the heaven, then a sign of a voice of a trumpet, and thirdly a resurrection of the dead; yet not of all, but as it was said: {The Lord shall come and all His saints with Him. Then shall} the world {see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven.}<sup>89</sup>

It is not certain when the Didache was written, but it seems reasonably sure that it was written after the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>90</sup>

Other authors are even more clear. For example, Ignatius wrote to the Ephesians and stated that the last times were upon them. He wrote that the Second Coming was still future in his letter to the Smyrneans.<sup>91</sup> The Epistle of Barnabas contains a statement that the Lord's coming was in the future. Chapter 16 of the Epistle clearly indicates that it was written after A.D. 70.<sup>92</sup> Justin Martyr refers to the resurrection as future (chapter 45), and accepted a literal millennium (chapters 80, 81), although others disagreed with him. Irenaeus argues that the church has one faith, and he describes what the church believed, which included the resurrection from the dead. His statements appear to refer to a future resurrection that includes all humanity.<sup>93</sup> He also refers to the future judgement by Christ.<sup>94</sup> Eusebius relates the preaching of a contemporary of Clement of Alexandria, Jude, who looked for the fulfillment of Daniel's seventy weeks and "thought that the coming of Antichrist, which was much talked about, was

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<sup>89</sup><http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-lightfoot.html>. 3 εν γαρ ταις εσχαις ημεραις πληθυνθησονται οι ψευδοπροφηται και οι φθορεις, και στραφησονται τα προβατα εις λυκους, και η αγαπη στραφησεται εις μισος. 4 αυξανουσης γαρ της ανομιαις μισησουσιν αλληλους και παραδωσουσι, και τοτε φανησεται ο κοσμοπλανης ως υιος θεου και ποιησει σημεια και τερατα, και η γη παραδοθησεται εις χειρας αυτου, και ποιησει αθεμια, α ουδεποτε γεγονεν εξ αιωνος. 5 τοτε ηξει η κτισις των ανθρωπων εις την πυρωσιν της δοκιμασιας, και σκανδαλισθησονται πολλοι και απολουνται, οι δε υπομειναντες εν τη πιστει αυτων σωθησονται υψ αυτου του καταθεματος. και τοτε φανησεται τα σημεια της αληθειας, πρωτον σημειον εκπετασεως εν ουρανω, ειτα σημειον φωιης σαλπγγος, και το τριτον αναστασις νεκρων, ου παντων δε, αλλ' ως ερρεθη, ηξει ο κυριος και παντες οι αγιοι μετ' αυτου. τοτε οψεται ο κοσμος τον κυριον ερχομενον επανω των νεφελων του ουρανος.  
<http://www-user.uni-bremen.de/~wie/texteapo/didache-greek.html>

<sup>90</sup>R. E. Nixon, "Didache," in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 297.

<sup>91</sup>Ignatius to the Ephesians, chapter 11; Ignatius to the Smyrneans, chapter 4.

<sup>92</sup>Epistle of Barnabas, chapter 21.

<sup>93</sup>Book 1 chapter 10.

<sup>94</sup>Book 5, chapter 27.

then near. So greatly did the agitation caused by the persecution of our people at this time disturb the minds of many.”<sup>95</sup> This would indicate that Christians only one hundred fifty years after the time of Paul still looked for the antichrist, and presumably the fulfillment of many other prophesied events as well.<sup>96</sup>

### Summary

It would appear as if there are four positions relative to understanding Jesus’ words about his returning within the lifetime of those then living. One, we can admit that he was incorrect, a position hard, if not impossible, to accept. Two, we can agree with the preterists, but this necessitates a large rewrite of other Christian doctrines. Three, we can understand that Jesus answered the disciples’ questions, but that their questions involved the misunderstanding that the end of the Temple would also mean the end of history. Jesus spoke then concerning the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the end of history, and events in the former that foreshadowed the latter. Moo’s comments above help put the understanding into its proper framework. With Jesus’s coming, death, burial, and resurrection the last days have begun and in terms of salvation-history the Lord’s coming is near. There is nothing else that must be done before Jesus returns. Four, we may understand that most of the Olivet Discourse does deal with the events leading up to the destruction of the Temple, but that the last part deals with the far distant future, future still to us.<sup>97</sup> This will be developed in the last section of this paper.

### Some General Criticisms

Preterist exegesis often assumes that similar or identical phrases or ideas must refer to the same event or idea. One example of this was described above, in defending the teaching that the resurrection occurred in A.D. 70. This approach often leads to exegesis by connect-the-similar-words-in-many-passages without considering the material in each individual context.<sup>98</sup> This connect-the-passage presentation is followed by a little argument, and ends up amounting to mostly a stringing together of potential proof texts until the reader gives in from the sheer amount of material presented. There is also little sensitivity to the differences between genres

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<sup>95</sup>Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.6.

<sup>96</sup>Dale Allison, *The End of the Ages Has Come* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 14.

<sup>97</sup>Mauro, *Seventy Weeks*, 211.

<sup>98</sup>For a fine example of this confusing “exegetical” method see Fenley, *Resurrection of the Dead* cited above and King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 41. King does recognize the danger of doing this when it is contrary to his own position. See p. 138. If the kingdom came with power in Acts 2, but this did not fulfill Mark 9:1, then perhaps the same objection can be raised against many other preterist positions.

and the progress of revelation. All Bible passages are treated as if they were of equal value in developing doctrine. There is little careful weighing of material and development of doctrine within the canon (see above in the discussion of 2 Peter 3). Texts that might give pause to one's considerations are often not dealt with, as we saw above in the description of the nature of the resurrection body. This especially is a serious flaw in much of the popular preterist material available on the internet. Since the preterist position necessitates the reworking of so much doctrine, preterists do more serious exegetical work that takes into account the progress of revelation, the differences of genre, and the original languages.

Max King uses English rather than Greek to exegete and set up his system at important points. In arguing that the "world" refers to the Jewish dispensation rather than the material world he references Titus 1:2 which does not have the word κόσμος, but rather reads: "a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time" (NIV). The Greek reads πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων. King argues that it makes no sense to believe that God promised eternal life before the creation and the Fall, but in fact this time frame does seem to be indicated by the language used.<sup>99</sup> While other passages he cites do refer to the "world," such poor exegesis undercuts his arguments.

A common complaint against the preterists is that they assume that the language of imminence in prophetic literature must refer to the immediate future. Futurists point to OT prophetic language that describes near events that were actually far in the future (Obadiah 15). It may be argued that the very nature of prophecy is to see as immediate that which is actually distant in time.<sup>100</sup>

Max King believes that Rev 21:1ff are both present and future to us.<sup>101</sup> But we must ask whether the word of eternal punishment in 21:8 are fulfilled. Nor does it seem as if the church is now living in the conditions described in chapters 21 and 22. The removal of the curse speaks of the curse of the earth (Gen 3:17), but the physical conditions today are the same as pre-A.D. 70. How then has the curse been removed? King believes that "whatever follows the return of Christ is 'for ever and ever,' never for a limited period of time . . ." <sup>102</sup> We are today in the "for ever and ever." The conditions of today—sin, death, tears, and mortality—are the condition the Earth and God's people here on Earth will experience until the sun runs out of energy. This does not square at all with Paul's description of death's defeat (1 Corinthians 15) and the destruction of all evils described in Revelation 21, 22.

The denial of the material (non-spiritual) in much of preterist eschatology is troubling. Many of them understand the resurrection body as spiritual. References to the resurrection are interpreted as either referring to a spiritual body, or to the passing of the Jewish order and the

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<sup>99</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 40.

<sup>100</sup>Wayne Jackson, *The Menace of Radical Preterism*, <http://www.christiancourier.com/feature/august99.htm>:1999. See Sproul's summary of this view and his comments in *Last Days*, 184-7.

<sup>101</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 128.

<sup>102</sup>King, *Cross and Parousia*, 222.

installation of the Christian. King even interprets Phil 3:7-10 as referring to Paul's attaining the dawn of the new Christian age when the Jewish age passed away.<sup>103</sup> Yet Paul wants to identify himself with Christ's death and resurrection, and so I question whether Paul's desire was to continue living in his own body in a Christian age. The emphasis is instead on the transformation of our bodies (3:21). It is not only our spiritual being that need redemption. Paul's discussion of the kind of body (1 Corinthians 15) we shall receive in the resurrection should indicate that it will be material, although drastically different than what we have now. Preterists believe that we shall live in a spiritual heaven, rather than here on earth. The preterist view about the future of the material world does not take into account Paul's argument in Romans 8 about how human sin has affected the material world. Nor does it take the entire sweep of redemptive history into account. There is a reason that the Bible begins with the creation of the material universe in Genesis 1 and ends with a restored material universe in Revelation 21 and 22.

Furthermore there is little that I have found about any future role for Israel.<sup>104</sup> While futurist interpreters remain divided about the future of Israel,<sup>105</sup> a good case may be made for a national conversion of Israel (Romans 11).<sup>106</sup> God's gifts and call are sure (Rom 11:29). So are the promises God made to Israel in the OT only for the church today, or do they remain in some way for Israel? If these promises were fulfilled in A.D. 70 and there remains nothing for Israel today, then what does one do with the promises of the OT that promise that Israel will always be specially loved by God (Lev 26:44-45; Isa 43:1-7, 54:4-8, 66:22; Jer 31:1-3, 13-20, 31-40; Mal 3:6)?<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 193-4.

<sup>104</sup>See White's brief summary of King's position regarding Romans 11 in "Preterism," 27-9; King, *Cross and Parousia*, 291-307.

<sup>105</sup>See Mauro's comments referring to the end of the 490 years of Daniel. "This being accomplished, God had no further use for Israel. His dealings thenceforth were to be with another people, that 'holy nation' (1 Pet. 2:9), composed of all who believe the gospel, and who 'receive' the One Who was rejected by 'His own' (John 1:11-13)." Mauro, *Seventy Weeks*, 78.

<sup>106</sup>King's position on Romans 11 is that the fullness of the Gentiles is that they will increase in spirituality in Christ, as described in Eph 4:15, 16. Israel's fullness and salvation are invisible and not historically visible. Israel is rescued from its bondage to corruption in the Old Covenant and brought into the New Covenant. (King, *Cross and Parousia*, 306-8; White, "Preterism," 29.) In the light of Paul's lament at the beginning of chapters 9 and 11, this hardly seems likely. Does it fit with the idea of the fullness, which seems to imply a number for both Jews and Gentiles (vv.12, 25). The hardening described in v. 25 appears to be lifted when the full number of the Gentiles comes in, but that certainly has not happened historically. Israel remains hardened to this very day.

<sup>107</sup>Although see Max King's article where he explains "all Israel" of Rom 11:26 as referring to the conversion of the 10 dispersed tribes before the destruction of Jerusalem.

If preterists are correct, then there is very little in the Bible that is directly for us. Much of Paul's writings were directed at specific problems, as were also the books of John, Peter, and Hebrews and these authors all expected the culmination of what they wrote about in A.D. 70. We are very much reading other people's mail. For example, for us there is no general resurrection, only a spiritual body (unconnected with our own physical body) when we die (in the view of many). There is no final resurrection of the righteous and the wicked, contrary to much biblical teaching (Dan. 12:2; Jn. 5:28-29; Acts 24:15).<sup>108</sup> There is no end of history; it will continue as long as the sun and the planet can sustain life. This amounts to a dualism with evil existing as long as the material universe exists.

For most evangelicals one of the tasks of the Biblical scholar, exegete, and preacher is to seek out how each Biblical passage applies to us today. The preterist has this task, but even more importantly must ask, *why* any passage should apply *at all* today.<sup>109</sup> We live in the culmination of the ages, we live in the prophesied future, in the new and eternal age. The Bible, therefore, is a record of the history of our faith, but not a guide to living today. But we must ask whether this is the way that the church, especially the church in the few decades after A.D. 70, historically approached the Scriptures. I believe not.

Preterist exegesis relies heavily on allegorical and spiritual interpretation. Its proponents admit this freely.<sup>110</sup> We saw one example of this above, in the allegory of Ishmael and Isaac. Whether it is justified to push Paul's allegory in Galatians 4 to include the time-table of the fall of Jerusalem is open to debate. Certainly the truth of what Paul teaches in Galatians is true whether or not one accepts the preterist position. It is a mistake to be over-literal, because much of the New Covenant does involve a spiritualization of the Old Covenant, with a corresponding "ratcheting up" of the understanding of God's requirements as inward and not outward. King does carefully define his terms "literal," "fleshly," and "spiritual," but I would argue that it is to accept many of his understandings and yet reject preterism. King is right in believing that it is possible to understand that the Old Covenant was fulfilled literally (it was really fulfilled) in the New Covenant and yet that many aspects of the Old were fulfilled in a symbolic or figurative sense rather than in a literal way (such as Amos 9; Acts 15:13-18).<sup>111</sup> However, when allegorizing or spiritualizing becomes one's guiding hermeneutic, it is difficult to counter. One

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Israel's future today is the same as any other group of people, they need to turn to Jesus and repent. Israel has no special role in God's plans otherwise. Max King, *And So All Israel Will Be Saved*, <http://www.livingpresence.org/articles/AndSo.html>:2001. See, however, *T. Dan* 6:4; *T. Sim.* 6:2-7; *T. Jud.* 23:5; Acts 3:19-21 which all mention a repentance of Israel before the end. Allison, *End of the Ages*, 155-7.

<sup>108</sup>Jackson, *Radical Preterism*.

<sup>109</sup>Stallard, *The Last Days*, note 31.

<sup>110</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 7, 8, 27.

<sup>111</sup>King, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 6, 7.

can interpret as one sees fit. Anything can fit one's theological position and it becomes very difficult for a critic to counter any particular interpretation.

Eschatology is important, although we are often too dogmatic about what we believe will happen in the future. We could often be a great deal less dogmatic and more charitable toward our brothers and sisters. What we believe about these issues affects how we put the Bible together and how we view the current world. For example, dispensationalists cite the dictum: Why polish the brass on a sinking ship?<sup>112</sup> Preterists would reply that the brass is dirty and the ship isn't sinking. Of course, if they are right, then Christians should rethink their entire approach to ecology, politics, and related subjects. Futurists, especially dispensationalists, are often accused of being full of doom and gloom. In their view this is true in the short run, but not in the long run. Futurists pay too much attention to the horrible events that may soon take place, but in the end there is a glorious future. A valid criticism is that futurists should stress more the glories with Christ and less the horrors of the Tribulation. If the preterists are correct, then the Earth's future is relatively unknown, and the believers' future is glorious but far different than what we have come to expect.

So, is preterism a heresy? Can it exist with historical Christianity? Full-blown preterism probably is a heresy, although the verdict may still be out. All parties should admit that a full preterism is not compatible with the Creeds and Confessions.<sup>113</sup> To go against the Creeds and Confessions is not damning or indicative of heresy in of itself, but it should raise many cautions. Preterists need to admit that they are advocating an almost total rewrite of not only eschatology (cosmic and personal) but also ecclesiology, sanctification, and many other doctrines. It is literally a different kind of Christianity and is incompatible with historical Christianity. This makes full-fledged preterism highly suspicious, but not heretical *if it can be demonstrated that it is Scriptural*. Perhaps a total rewrite is necessary, but *only if* the basic principles of historical Christianity's understandings are shown to be in error. To my mind this would be tantamount to admitting that the course of Christianity in the area of eschatology *and all the doctrines that we have discussed above* has been *fundamentally* (not just partially) *incorrect* during 95% of its history. Has the Holy Spirit guided the church thorough its history, or not? While it appears that preterism preserves the words and teachings of Scripture, in order to be consistent it does violence to other doctrines, in particular the resurrection. When one ends up so far from what the church has taught (and what I believe the Bible teaches), then one should ask whether one's starting point is correct or not.<sup>114</sup>

Varieties of preterism that await the future resurrection and second coming are not heretical. Thus we conclude that partial preterism is much more compatible with historical Christian understandings, although the fit will be more or less comfortable depending on the particulars of one's interpretation regarding eschatology.<sup>115</sup> Both versions of preterism point to

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<sup>112</sup>See other examples in DeMar, *End Times Fiction*, 198-200.

<sup>113</sup>Sproul, *Last Days*, 156-8; White, "Preterism," 3, 4, 51.

<sup>114</sup>Sproul, *Last Days*, 203.

<sup>115</sup>Harden, *Heretic*; Sproul, *Last Days*, 158.

the need for a better understanding of the events of A.D. 70 in salvation history, an emphasis that needs to be worked out, no matter how difficult that may be in today's theological and political climate.<sup>116</sup>

We must applaud the desire of the preterists to use the Scripture to formulate doctrine, and specifically to understand accurately Jesus' words and their implications. They are certainly trying to be consistent in their eschatology! At the least it is troublesome that their views bring them to deny the historical (and I believe Biblical) understanding of the resurrection.<sup>117</sup>

### How Should We Understand Jesus' Prophecies?

If we reject the preterist view that Jesus came in A.D. 70, how can we then understand Jesus' prophecies in the Olivet Discourse? One view is that we understand that Jesus' teachings inaugurated eschatology. Rather than "realized eschatology", we should understand an "inaugurated eschatology".<sup>118</sup> Jesus' words about the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, even if symbolically understood, tie together Jesus' return, the final judgment, the gathering of all peoples, and the general resurrection.<sup>119</sup> It is hard to understand how these events could have occurred already. The Jews of Jesus' day did not expect these events to only affect them and their system of sacrifice and belief, but rather they expected that Israel would be vindicated before the world and the entire world would be involved in these events.

A more sophisticated view is to examine Jesus' statements within the strain of apocalyptic thought of his time. Although this literature lacks a standard approach to the great tribulation, it is sometimes seen as both including present sufferings, and the future.<sup>120</sup> *First Enoch*, written sometime around the time of the Maccabees, divides history into 10 periods. The author and his contemporaries were in the seventh period. This was a period characterized by great wickedness and tribulation for the righteous. Soon, however, the seventh week would end and the situation for the righteous would improve. *Syriac Baruch* (written about A.D. 100) presents messianic woes as both future and imminent. Although the present time is full of woe, more difficult times are yet ahead, but the righteous would be protected.<sup>121</sup> Yet other literature (*Jubilees*) describes the great tribulation as past or relates the sufferings of the righteous

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<sup>116</sup>Sproul, *Last Days*, 25.

<sup>117</sup>Sproul, *Last Days*, 203.

<sup>118</sup>Allison, *End of the Ages*, 150.

<sup>119</sup>Allison, *End of the Ages*, 161.

<sup>120</sup>Allison, *End of the Ages*, 6-8, 25-6, 1QH III 12-18.

<sup>121</sup>Allison, *End of the Ages*, 15-9.

(*Jubilees, As. Mos.*).<sup>122</sup> This fluidity may indicate that Jesus referred to both near future and distant future tribulations.

Calvin believed that the disciples' question as recorded in Matthew was erroneous to begin with. They believed that the Temple would stand until the end of time, and so for them their question equated the destruction of the Temple with the return of Christ and the end of the world.<sup>123</sup> The events of "that generation" established what Jesus spoke of, but did not completely fulfill them. Thus Jesus' response is mixed, containing material that refers to the end and to the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>124</sup> Cranfield states that the judgment on Jerusalem are "a transparent object in the foreground through which [Jesus] sees the last events before the End, which they indeed foreshadow."<sup>125</sup> The fall of Jerusalem foreshadows the events that accompany the end. This view, however, runs aground on the temporal markers that predict the fall of Jerusalem within the lifetime of those who heard him. We should note, however, that Matthew leaves open the possibility of Jesus' answer also addressing material regarding the parousia (Matt 24:3) although Mark and Luke only record the question about the destruction of the Temple.<sup>126</sup>

Palm, in his work on Mark 13, develops in more detail the fourth option outlined above. He believes that vv. 5-29 describe the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem, and that after v. 30 Jesus refers to his return. The coming in v. 26 is a coming in judgment, the return in v. 35 is later. The former coming is accompanied by visible signs, the timing of the latter coming is not known.<sup>127</sup> This approach denies that Mark 13:24-27 and parallels refer to the parousia or Second Coming. Instead, these verses are "a symbolic portrayal of the destruction of Jerusalem and special inauguration of the kingdom of God."<sup>128</sup> The destruction of Jerusalem is Jesus' vindication before the nation of Israel.<sup>129</sup> This approach must distinguish between "those days" (ἐν ἐκεῖναις ταῖς ἡμέραις) in v. 24, "these things" (ταῦτα) in vv. 29, 30 on the one hand and "that day or hour" (τῆς ἡμέρας ἐκείνης ἢ τῆς ὥρας) in v. 32 and "that time" (πότε ὁ καιρός)

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<sup>122</sup>Allison, *End of the Ages*, 19-20.

<sup>123</sup>John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 3, *Matthew, Mark and Luke, Vol III, James and Jude*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. A. Morrison (Grand Rapids: St. Andrew Press, 1972; Eerdmans, 1989), 97-8; Sproul, *Last Days*, 31-2.

<sup>124</sup>Palm, "Signs," 36; G. E. Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom* (London: Word, 1964), 305 ff.

<sup>125</sup>C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 405.

<sup>126</sup>Palm, "Signs," 76.

<sup>127</sup>Palm, "Signs," 5-7.

<sup>128</sup>Palm, "Signs," 7. See also France, *Old Testament*, 230-3.

<sup>129</sup>France, *Old Testament*, 236.

in v. 33 on the other. The retention of the far demonstrative, however, may be against viewing this transition as indicating time shift, but the transition *περὶ δέ* often indicates a change in subject.<sup>130</sup> The plural “days” now shifts to a singular “day” and “hour.” Instead of a set time frame, no one knows of the distant time except the Father, and there will be no signs that precede this latter coming.<sup>131</sup> The contrast between the description of life before the fall of Jerusalem and Jesus’ coming is also striking. Before the fall of Jerusalem, there will be dreadful times, with death and destruction coming (Matt 24:15-21). Before the coming of the Son of Man, life will be normal (Matt 24:37-41 cf. 1 Thess 5:4, 5). In the warnings about the future of Jerusalem, Jesus speaks to his disciples, but about the future coming and judgment he says to everyone (cf. Mark 13:5 and 13:37).<sup>132</sup> Finally, the surrounding parables indicate that there will be a very long interval before the events of Mark 13:32-37 come to pass. The virgins fall asleep (Matt 25:5), the wicked servant observes that the master is gone a long time (Matt 24:48), and the master in the parable of the talents returns after a long time (Matt 25:19).<sup>133</sup> Such an approach takes Jesus’ timetable seriously, but avoids many of the pitfalls of full-blown preterism.

If Palm is correct, then many futurist views have details correct, but totally out of order. The first coming of Jesus was the incarnation, the second is a judgment on Jerusalem which follows the great tribulation, and last is the still future rapture followed by the last judgment. This brief sketch does even begin to consider the book of Revelation and other eschatological material and how they might fit in. Further thought is needed.

Lastly, we understand that the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem are a foreshadowing or type of the events prior to Jesus’ final coming. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully develop a theory of types and recapitulation nor can we explore extensively how the NT uses the OT in understanding prophecy. Israel is a type of Jesus, both of whom God called out of Egypt (Matt 2:15). Jonah is a sign for the people of Jesus’ generation, and the former’s time in the belly of the fish is a type of the time that Jesus will spend in the grave, and so on. God rescues his people: Noah, Israel through the Red Sea. The captivity in Babylon recapitulates the bondage in Egypt. The return of the Exiles (a remnant) and the rescue of Israel through the Red Sea foretell the final salvation through Jesus Christ. The idea of typology may make several fulfillments possible.<sup>134</sup> One prophecy may be fulfilled in one event, but not have its significance exhausted in that event, leaving room for further fulfillment at higher levels.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>130</sup>Palm, “Signs,” 27-8.

<sup>131</sup>Palm, “Signs,” 28. Other references to the final judgment are to a singular “day.” Matt 7:22, 11:22.

<sup>132</sup>Palm, “Signs,” 30.

<sup>133</sup>Palm, “Signs,” 31-32.

<sup>134</sup>White, “Preterism,” 67-75.

<sup>135</sup>Even King admits that this has happened at least once in the new heavens and new earth partially fulfilled in the return from Exile, and having its completion in the age to come,

The earlier fulfillment points toward later fulfillment. Other examples in Matthew include the slaughter of the innocents (2:17, 18), the people hearing but not understanding (6:9, 10), and perhaps the Abomination of Desolation (24:15).<sup>136</sup> This principle of typology and multiple fulfillment may then allow for the Olivet Discourse to pertain both to the fall of Jerusalem and to a future time. Thus Jesus threatens to come in judgment on the churches of Revelation (2:5, 16) and on Jerusalem in A.D. 70. White argues convincingly that there is a Biblical pattern of destruction, judgment and renewal especially for the temple. This was true for the first temple, of Jesus' body, of individual churches, the individual person, and ultimately for the universal church and the world itself.<sup>137</sup> This pattern, then may be extended to the universal church and the world itself. There will be a time when Jesus returns and judges the world. There will be a destruction of the old Earth, and the making of a new.<sup>138</sup>

If the heavens and the earth are said to pass away, and this prophecy is fulfilled in some sense with the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, why does that rule out the possibility of a future fulfillment at the cosmological level? Indeed, the fact that the temple which is destroyed symbolizes the heavens and earth naturally leads to the conclusion that the same will occur to the heaven and earth themselves.<sup>139</sup>

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which King believes is the church age, begun in its fulness in A.D. 70. King, *Cross and Parousia*, 82.

<sup>136</sup>See further examples in White, "Preterism," 85-7.

<sup>137</sup>White points out that the temple was understood to be a microcosm of the world. "Preterism," 88.

<sup>138</sup>White, "Preterism," 85-8. See also Palm, "Signs," 146-51.

<sup>139</sup>White, "Preterism," 90.