

Preterism: Has All Prophecy Been Fulfilled?

AN ESSAY BY

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DEFINITION

Full preterism teaches that *all* biblical prophecy has been fulfilled, including the second coming of Christ, Satan and the Antichrist being thrown into the lake of fire, the resurrection of the dead, and the full arrival of the kingdom of God.

SUMMARY

While there is a partial variety of preterism that finds more agreement with much of evangelical theology, full preterism is the position that *all* biblical prophecy has been fulfilled: the coming of Christ in judgment was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, Satan and Antichrist have been thrown into the lake of fire, the kingdom of God has arrived, the resurrection is understood in spiritual terms, the Great Commission has been fulfilled, all things have been made new (the old heaven and earth have passed away; the new heaven and earth have come), the promised restoration has arrived, and the world now continues as it is *ad infinitum*. Problems with this position include that it does not take the already-not yet pattern of the New Testament into account, it over-emphasizes some statements in the Gospels to the exclusion of others, and that it does not line up with the timeline of the New Testament documents, our experience of the world, or the theology of the early church.

Introduction

Preterism (deriving from the Latin *preter*, meaning “past”) is an approach to biblical eschatology that understands all prophecies as fulfilled in the first century AD. “Partial preterism,” as the term indicates, understands *most* biblical prophecy as already fulfilled (the Olivet discourse, Antichrist, the tribulation, the millennium, etc.). “Full preterism” (the focus of this essay and often referred to as hyper-preterism) contends that *all* biblical prophecy has been fulfilled: the prophecy of the coming of Christ in judgment was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, Satan and Antichrist have been thrown into the lake of fire, the kingdom of God has arrived, the resurrection is understood in spiritual terms, the Great Commission has been fulfilled, all things have been made new (the old heaven and earth have passed away; the new heaven and earth have come), the promised restoration has arrived, and the world now continues as it is *ad infinitum*.

Preterists often ground their view in biblical passages such as the following:

I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes ([Matt. 10:23](#)).

Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom (Matt. 16:28).

Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place (Matt. 24:34).

I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God (Luke 9:27).

Preterists find further support in the familiar biblical exhortations to “watch” for the “soon” coming of Christ.

The “Consistent Eschatology” of Lutheran theologian Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) argued that the imminent eschatological expectations of Jesus turned out to be mistaken. Preterism, in turn, contends that full preterism is the only effective answer to this “liberal” viewpoint.

Evaluation and Response

Whatever disagreements in detail they might have among them, most readers of biblical prophecy since the beginning of the church have understood it to lend the expectation of a final, climactic in-breaking of God in world history, establishing a recognizably new world order marked by physical resurrection and the personal, bodily presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. The vast majority of Christians find the full preterist interpretation of biblical prophecy surprising for many reasons that we can only highlight here.

Preterism and the Biblical Perspective of History

The “very good” and “blessed” creation of Genesis 1–2 has now fallen under divine judgment (Gen. 3), and subsequent biblical writers anticipate a restoration of the created order and reversal of the curse in “the new heaven and the new earth” (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). Even if the many “back to Eden” passages in the Prophets (e.g., Isa. 9, 11, 25-26, 35, 65-66) are understood in symbolic terms (which is by no means certain), other related prophecies seem unmistakably clear. In Romans 8:18–23, for example, Paul affirms that this present order, “subjected to futility” (8:20) and marked by “groaning” (8:22) in fallenness and “bondage to corruption” (8:21), will experience a recognizable reversal at the resurrection of the just (8:23). Just as human sin had consequences that affected the created order, so also the created order will be caught up in final human redemption and be restored. Peter also directs us to expect a day of cosmic renewal:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:10–13; cf. Rev 20:11).

History will not just end, much less just continue as it is in its fallenness—it will reach its intended goal and witness “the restoration of all things” (Acts 3:21). God does not intend to leave creation—or humanity—in its fallen condition. His “blessed” purpose for creation will yet be realized (Eph. 1:10; Rev. 21–22). This prospect is pervasive in biblical prophecy.

Preterism and the Pattern or Structure of Biblical Prophecy

It is true that this age is the age of fulfillment—the Messianic age has dawned. But that is not the whole picture. The NT describes this age as the inaugurated aspect of the age to come—its fullness awaits the culmination of the ages at the return of Christ. End time prophecy has been fulfilled, and yet its climactic fulfillment is still to come. Preterism fails to recognize this “now and yet again” and “now and not yet” fulfillment of biblical prophecy, but it is pervasive throughout the prophetic Word. Genesis 3:15, the first prophecy of Scripture, finds its fulfillment in the first coming of Christ and yet reaches culmination in stages (Matt. 12:22–29; John 12:31; Rom. 16:20; Rev. 19–20). The kingdom of God is here (Matt. 12:28; Col. 1:13) and is yet to come (Matt. 6:10; Luke 19:11ff; 2 Tim. 4:1; 2 Pet. 1:11; Rev. 11:15). The King has come (Matt. 2:2), has taken his place at the throne of God (Acts 2:36), and will yet come to exercise the full rights of his kingship (Luke 19:11ff; Rev. 19:11ff). The tribulation and Antichrist are here and yet to come (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). We are the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), and yet we await it (Rev. 21:5). We await the resurrection (John 5:28–29), although the hour of resurrection has arrived (John 5:25). Eternal life is ours today (John 5:24), and yet it awaits the final day (Dan. 12:2).

This now and not yet fulfillment of prophecy “in stages” is standard issue in Scripture. There is today an overlap of the ages. The Messianic age to come has arrived, but only in its inaugurated form—its fullness awaits the consummation.

It is essential to recognize this phenomenon in Scripture if we are to understand biblical prophecy. This “now and again” or “now and not yet” fulfillment is the regular pattern, and we must be careful not to force the “not yet” aspects of given prophecies into the mold of the “now.” That is, to establish a present fulfillment of a given prophecy is not itself proof that there is no more to come.

Preterism and the Biblical Descriptions of the Return of Christ and Attending Events

With these larger structures in mind the question narrows. Do the biblical prophecies, in fact, lead us to expect more to come? The answer is a resounding “Yes!”

In his Olivet discourse our Lord himself affirms that his return will be personal and visible: “they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds” (Matt. 24:30; cf. Dan. 7:13–14; Matt. 26:64). The angels at his ascension explicitly reaffirm the same—“he will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:9–11). John reaffirms also: “We shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2); “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him” (Rev. 1:7). These words plainly lead us to expect a personal, bodily, visible, recognizable return of our Lord that history is yet to witness. Indeed, Jesus warned us not to be taken in by those who would claim that he has already returned, assuring us that when he comes it will be unmistakable, and all will know it (Matt. 24:23–27).

So also with regard to the coming resurrection of the dead. No one disputes that there is a spiritual resurrection we experience in Christ today ([John 5:25](#); [Eph. 2:5](#)), but plenty of biblical passages assure us that our bodily resurrection is yet to come ([John 5:28–29](#); [Acts 24:15](#); [Phil. 3:11](#); [1 Thess. 4:13–18](#)). Indeed, Paul’s very argument in [1 Corinthians 15](#) is that the hope of our future bodily resurrection is bound up with the gospel itself. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, so we who are in him shall be raised also (15:20–23) with a body that is continuous with the body of this life yet fitted for the age to come (15:35–57), a body like Jesus’ resurrection body (15:49; cf. [Phil. 3:20–21](#)). God’s saving purpose is comprehensive; he will restore us body and soul ([Rom. 8:23](#)). In a coming day death itself will be destroyed, even reversed ([1 Cor. 15:54–55](#)), and then, at last, “death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” ([Rev. 21:4](#)). This is the happy prospect of God’s saving purpose.

So also with regard to the end time judgments. The devastation of Jerusalem in AD 70, awful as it was, did not exhaust the prophecies of world-wide judgment yet to come ([Acts 17:31](#); [Rev. 6–19](#)). The day is still to come when God will destroy all his enemies and give public vindication to his previously persecuted people ([2 Thess. 1:5–10](#)).

Space allows only a brief mention of the biblical prospect of the conversion of Israel. Our Lord spoke of it in [Matthew 23:37–39](#):

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

It would be difficult to satisfy the demands of this prophecy within a preterist framework (cf. [Rom. 9–11](#), esp. 11:26).

Preterism and the Book of Revelation

The date of John’s writing of the book of Revelation is of critical importance to preterism. John’s portrayal of the end time judgments and the return of Christ are so graphic and unmistakable that if written after the events of AD 70, preterism could not survive. Thus, the preterist claim is that Revelation was written in the 60s, prior to the destruction of Jerusalem.

However, that Revelation was, in fact, written *after* AD 70 is the unanimous testimony of the early church. This “external” evidence that John wrote in the last decade of the first century during the reign of the emperor Domitian (AD 81–96) seems to be reflected in Revelation itself (see See Ethelbert Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars*, especially chapter 11). Domitian’s favorite title was *Dominus et Deus noster* – “our Lord and God.” He was greeted in the Roman Senate with the chant, *princeps principum, summe ducem* – “Leader of leaders, highest of leaders.” Other titles were, “Lord of the earth,” “Invincible,” “Holy,” “Blessed,” and another chant was “Worthy are you to inherit the kingdom!” Men were given to promote his worship with mass proclamations of his deity and glory. All this bears a striking resemblance to much of what we find in Revelation with regard to Christ or the Beast and the false prophet. It seems that Revelation is, in some measure, John’s very contemporary polemic.

Also of possible interest is [Revelation 2:4](#), in which the Lord Jesus criticizes the church at Ephesus for having “abandoned the love you had at the first.” Paul served in Ephesus in the 50s and Timothy in the 60s, and they give no such indication of this growing spiritual defection. The criticism seems to imply some passage of time, more than a writing date prior to AD 70 would allow.

The “thousand years” of [Revelation 20](#) also present a problem for the preterist interpretation. The various “millennial” interpretations aside, preterism must fit this thousand-year period in the first century. Some preterists insist that it refers to the time from Christ’s ascension to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Others take it as the time from 70 to 73 (the fall of Masada) and others to 132 (the Bar Kochba rebellion). In any case, it is difficult to understand “1,000 years,” symbolic though it may be, in terms of such a short span of time.

Moreover, as we have already hinted above, it would be difficult indeed to find John’s depiction of the eternal state as fulfilled in this age—Satan destroyed, no more curse or dying, all things new, etc. ([Rev. 21-22](#)).

The Preterist “Proof Texts”

What, then, of the preterists’s “proof texts”? Space does not allow a survey of the various interpretations of these verses, but we can highlight the most common.

[Matthew 24:34](#) reads, “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” It may be that “all these things” refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and Jesus’s other descriptions of this age, *but not his return*. Or it may be that the events of AD 70 were an initial fulfillment prospective of the climactic judgment to come. Either of these understandings could satisfy the demands of the text. The preterist interpretation is by no means obvious.

In [Matthew 10:23](#), Jesus says to his disciples, “You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” Many interpretations of this verse have been offered. It is probably easiest to see this as, indeed, a reference to Jesus’s “coming” in judgment against Jerusalem in AD 70. Note, however, that this in no way rules out his later return to bring the kingdom to its consummation. In fact, this former “coming” would then be understood as prospective of his eschatological return.

In [Matthew 16:28](#), Jesus says to his disciples, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” Once again, this statement easily fits into Matthew’s “now and not yet” kingdom theme. Our Lord manifested his kingdom in his resurrection, his ascension, in Pentecost, in the destruction of Jerusalem, in the gentile mission.

So also, we should mention, the passages that speak of Jesus’s return as “near” or “soon” in coming ([Jas. 5:8](#); [1 Pet. 4:7](#); [Rev. 22:20](#)) must not be isolated from those that speak of it as “delayed” and “after a long time” ([Matt. 25:5, 19](#); cf. [Luke 12:41–48](#); [20:9](#)). The parable [Luke 19:11ff](#) is in fact given specifically to correct this mistaken notion that his return must be very soon. And the whole of [2 Peter 3](#) likewise is given to affirm the delay of the consummated kingdom. Our Lord will not tarry forever. He will return, and until then we are called to “wait patiently” for him ([Jas 5:7–8](#)).

Preterism and the Viewpoint of Christians Following AD 70

Finally, we should mention at least briefly that Christians alive immediately following the destruction of Jerusalem did not share the preterist understanding but unanimously anticipated the return of Christ, the bodily resurrection, and the coming judgment. This observation is important: if, as the preterist contends, the apostles understood prophecy to be fulfilled in the events of AD 70, then why did their immediate followers still maintain the traditional future hope? It would seem that believers after AD 70 shared the same hope as those previously.

Final Reflections

The preterist understanding appears to absolutize the “already” fulfilled prophecies in such a way that forces the larger “not yet” fulfilled prophecies into their mold. Still, the broad prospect of biblical prophecy encourages us to look expectantly to our Lord’s return. Many specific prophecies affirm this hope repeatedly. The early church so understood it. The hope of the church is well-founded. Maranatha! The Lord comes!

FURTHER READING

- Got Questions Ministries, “[What is the preterist view of the end times?](#)”
- James Stuart Russell, *The Parousia*
- Keith Mathison, ed., *When Shall These Things Be?*
- Wayne Jackson, “[The Menace of Radical Preterism](#)”

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