

THE PRETERIST VIEW OF NEW TESTAMENT PROPHECY

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Interest in Biblical prophecy intensifies as we near the end of the millennium. (If Christ was born in the spring of 4 B.C. it is already 2002!). Along with an increase in sensationalism we are also witnessing a revival of a view of Biblical prophecy that was popular in previous centuries but almost unheard of in this one. Now its revival is chronicled by the appearance of books, tapes, many websites, and a growing number of adherents. The prevailing view for most of this century is that nearly all the great NT prophetic passages point to some future fulfillment. This view is generally known as the *futurist* (FT) view of prophecy.
- B. *Major* Prophetic passages in the NT

Matt. 24,25; Mark 13; Luke 17:20-37; I Cor. 15:24-26,51-52; I Thess. 4:13-18; II Thess. 2:1-12; Titus 2: 11-14; Rev. 4-22.

II. REASONS WHY FUTURISM MAY BE WANING IN POPULARITY

- A. Since WW II many Bible teachers and preachers have sensationalized prophecy by making predictions and setting dates for Christ's return. This writer has at least one bookshelf of such genre of books! In these books, at least a dozen world leaders in the last 20 years have been designated the Antichrist! Some recent books that expose this sensationalism in prophetic interpretation are: *Soothsayers of the Second Advent* by William M. Alnor; *Doomsday Delusions* by C. Marvin Pate and Calvin B. Haines, Jr.; and *Selling Fear* by Gregory S. Camp.
- B. As we approach the end of the century, recent historical events in Russia and Europe have caused some to re-think previous prophetic interpretation.
- C. There is new discussion about the date of the last book of the NT. One primary source is *Redating the New Testament* by John A.T. Robinson (See below for more info.)

III. GENERAL PROBLEMS IN PROPHETIC INTERPRETATION

- A. Eschatology, the doctrine of last things, is one of the most difficult areas

in all of theology. For 2000 years there has not been a clear consensus among church leaders as to how the last events will occur. For a good overview of the various interpretations of end-time events among evangelicals we recommend: *The Millennial Maze*, by Stanley G. Grenz.

- B. Biblical prophecies are often given in highly figurative and context sensitive language. Therefore, extensive knowledge of the original language, and the historical and cultural situation, is necessary for proper interpretation. Often presuppositions about the nature of God's redemptive plan color the outcome of prophetic interpretation.
- C. In a list of why people have rejected Christianity over the centuries, failed NT prophecy is often cited. The claim is, that Christ predicted His return during the lifetime of His disciples, and they clearly expected His return as they noted in their writings. Since this did not occur in the First Century, the deity of Christ, and the authority and inspiration of Scripture are rejected. See *Why I am not a Christian*, by Bertrand Russell (p.16).

IV. THE PRETERIST VIEW (PT)

- A. Definition: In theology, a preterist is one who believes the prophecies in the book of Revelation were fulfilled in 70 A.D. when the temple and city of Jerusalem were destroyed. With the exception of some extreme preterists, most believe the last three chapters are yet to be fulfilled. In other words, Christ will appear in person, there will be a resurrection and a final judgement, i.e., a consummation of the Kingdom.

A PT believes that the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. looms large in the thinking and preaching of Jesus, John the Baptist and the Apostles. The many imminency passages in the NT refer to Christ's coming in judgement on Jerusalem for their failure to keep the covenant and for rejecting the Messiah. They argue that when the NT writers used the phrase *this generation* it referred to that generation that was alive at the time of Christ, and that the phrase *last days* refers to the last days of the Old Covenant. It is argued that the destruction of the Temple is crucial to God's program with the church. Israel was a theocracy; their whole life was centered around the Temple and its ritual. With the destruction of the Temple it would have been obvious that the Old Covenant (the Mosaic) had ended. This seems to be exactly the argument of the writer

of the Epistle of Hebrews. At the beginning he immediately announces that these are *the last days*. PTs further argue that it helps explain the dire warning passages in the book and its argument about having a better covenant.

B. Adherents

While this view is currently not that well known, in previous centuries (as recently as the 19th) it was held by the majority of Biblical scholars. Most readers may be surprised to know that two of the most popular one volume commentaries of all time espouse this view. They are the commentaries by Matthew Henry, and Jamison, Fausset and Brown. Other earlier adherents were Jonathan Edwards, John Owen, David Brown, Frederic Farrar, John Lightfoot, F.J.A. Hort, B.F. Westcott, Moses Stuart, C.F.D. Moule, Milton Terry, Patrick Fairbairn, J. Stuart Russell, and J.A. Alexander, just to name a few.

More recent and contemporary adherents of PT are: Marcellus Kik, Jay Adams, Douglas Wilson, Gary DeMar, Kenneth Gentry, Gary North, Greg Bahnsen, David Chilton, Ralph Woodrow, Peter Leithart, Iain Murray, George Grant, R.T. France, R.V.G. Tasker, and R.C. Sproul.

C. The Importance of the Date of the NT.

Both FT's and PT's believe that the NT books were written early, that is before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. An exception is the FT's who believe the Apostle John's writings, particularly the Apocalypse, were written about 20-25 years after the fall of Jerusalem, and near the end of the century. Note: it is important to the FT's position that the book of Revelation be composed at a late date for their view of prophecy to be credible. Likewise, it is equally as important for the PTs that the book be composed early (before 70 A.D.) for its view to be viable. Like no other book in the NT, the date of its composition is the most valuable key to its correct interpretation. For most of this century, the prevailing opinion has been that John wrote the Apocalypse while an aged man near the end of the First Century during the reign of emperor Domitian around 90 A.D. When liberal NT scholar, Bishop John A.T. Robinson, wrote his earth-shaking *Redating the New Testament*, it was largely ignored by evangelical scholars with a FT view of prophecy. But the fact is, the book is partially responsible for the revival of the PT movement. A good review of the evidence for the late date can be found in: *The Book of*

Revelation, by Robert H. Mounce. For the other side see: ***Before Jerusalem Fell***, by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.

The trend today in NT studies in general is shifting the date of the composition of the books of the NT to an earlier and earlier date. There are two main, and inter-related reasons for this: (1) Studies of the Dead Sea Scrolls and early papyri of John's writings are pushing back the date of composition. (2) If John wrote after the Temple was destroyed why in all of his writings is there not even an allusion to it?

D. Review of the Key Scriptural Passages

1. The Olivet Discourse and its context. (Matt 23, 24; Mk. 13; and Lk. 17:20-37).
 - a. The Context: Just prior to the discourse (Matt. 23) a curse was pronounced on the nation in the form of seven woes. After the 7th woe, Jesus said: ...all this will come upon this generation.(vs. 36). Jesus then followed that statement with: *Look, your house is left to you desolate.*(vs. 38).
 - b. The Questions of the Disciples (Mk. 13:4; Lk. 21:7ff.): The disciples immediately grasped that Jesus referred to the destruction of the Temple, a building that was one of the greatest structures on the earth at the time. The disciples were dumbfounded, and immediately wanted to know the exact time this would take place.
 - c. The Answer: In Matt. 24: 34, Jesus said: *I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.* The problem with this passage is that Jesus did not say *some* things, but *all* things.
 - d. The Preterist Argument: The PT's argue that the Olivet Discourse is a prophecy about the coming destruction of the city and the Temple, and does not refer to some cataclysmic event some 2000+ years in the future. They would refer to the obvious reference to the destruction of the temple in Matt. 24: 2. Furthermore, they conclude that all the events described in Matt. 24 (and the Mark and Luke passages) can be made to fit into events that surrounded that day in 70 A.D. The coming Christ

referred to was not His coming that precedes the final judgement, but His coming in judgement on *that* generation, a generation that Josephus says was the most wicked ever.

- e. Support: (1) There are many passages in John's preaching and that of Jesus that stress the nearness of coming judgement. It may even be anticipated in Mal. 3:2. (2) In most cases, the Greek word for *generation* always refers to a generation living at that time. It is even more so when used with the demonstrative *this*. (3) Other warnings about the imminency of coming judgement in the Epistles and the book of Revelation strengthen their case. See especially James 5:7-9 and I Pet 4:7 *The end of all things is near*. (4) Extra-biblical writers describe the destruction of Jerusalem in similar terms.
- f. The FTs Respond:

Not all FTs deny that there is some reference to 70 A.D. in the Olivet Discourse. Some admit that Matt. 24:1-14 refers to the near view, but then Jesus describes His coming to earth at the end of time. Others conclude that the entire discourse is about the distant future, and is a condensed version of the Apocalypse. FT's reject the near view because they claim there are many events in the discourse that were not fulfilled at that time. For example, the signs in the sky and the gathering of the elect from the four corners of the earth described in vs. 29-31.

The FT answer to vs. 34 is that the Greek word for *generation* can have a secondary meaning of tribe, or *nation*. But many FTs admit this is an unlikely usage in view of Matthew's use of the term. Another view that is offered is that *this generation* refers to that generation of Israelites who are alive right before Christ returns in the distant future. There are several problems with this in that it may say more than FTs want it to say, because it implies that at that time Israel as a nation will cease. The other problem is the personal pronouns used in the previous verse (33).

What some FTs offer as a compromise is the idea of partial, (double, multiple) fulfillment. There is precedent for it in Scripture (See Isa. 7:14 and Matt. 1:18). This certainly is

possible and needs further study. Our initial reaction though, is how can we know for certain when a prophecy might have a greater fulfillment in the distant future. It seems to be a problem of subjectivity.

2. The Book of Revelation.

PTs believe the book of Revelation was written to 7 churches who were about to undergo severe persecution for their beliefs. The writer's purpose is to comfort them by showing them prophetically that their two enemies: the Roman Empire (*the Beast*) and apostate Israel (*the False Prophet*) are going to be judged. PTs claim all the events described in the book can be applied to the calamity that occurred on August, 70 A.D. and the years just before. The main key to this interpretation is the indication by the author that what he is about to tell them will happen shortly. (See Rev. 1:1, 3; 22:7, 20.) Also, the author is told not to seal up this prophecy (22:10) as was Daniel (12:4) who prophesied about distant future events. PTs believe Nero was the one persecuting the Christians and that he was the one referred to as *the beast* (both he and the empire). Indeed, his nickname to his contemporaries was just that, *the Beast*. Historians said he was the vilest man known. In Hebrew his name adds up to 666. Nero persecuted the Christians for 3 and one-half months just as was prophesied, they claim. He was also the 6th Roman emperor, and when he committed suicide another reigned for a short time (Galba). After Nero's death a myth developed all over the kingdom that Nero would rise again. PTs say this is all prophesied in Rev. 17.

The FTs main objection is that the events described in the prophecy just could not have been fulfilled during the destruction of Jerusalem, and therefore refer to a far greater tribulation, one like the world has not yet seen. PTs counter by noting that historians like Josephus and others give descriptions of that day that are astoundingly similar to the prophecy. For example, Josephus describes strange signs that occurred in the heavens; he mentions a slaughter in the sea of Galilee that turned the lake to the color of blood, that the destruction was the worse since creation, that chariots and troops appeared in the clouds, etc. Regretfully, we have no space for these many quotes but we would like to give one representative example from the pagan historian Tacitus:

*In the sky appeared a vision of armies in conflict, of glittering armour. A sudden lightning flash from the cloud lit up the Temple. The doors of the holy place abruptly opened, a superhuman voice was heard to declare that the gods were leaving it, and in the same instant came the rushing tumult of their departure. **The Histories**, p.279. (Penguin edition)*

3. Other important passages that stress the imminency : Matt. 10:23; 16:27ff.; 26:64; Rom. 13:11ff.; I Cor. 7:26-31; 10:11; II Thess. 2:7; Heb. 1:2; 9:26;10:25;10:37; James 5:7-9; I Pet. 1:20; 4:7; I John 2:8,17, 18; Jude 18,19.
4. Important Extra-biblical Sources

The PT view counts heavily on extra-biblical sources like Josephus, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Eusebius for support. For a contemporary narrative account of the destruction of Jerusalem which incorporates most of these sources, we recommend: ***When Jerusalem Burned***, by Gerard Israel, and Jacques LeBar (If you decide to read this some evening, make sure you have the next day off!)

V. STRENGTHS OF THE PRETERIST VIEW

- A. Their argument for the meaning of *generation* seems to have solid linguistic support.
- B. There appears to be good reasons to question the evidence for the late date of the book of Revelation.
- C. It seems right to give a more important place to the destruction of the temple in the light of the transition from Old covenant to New.
- D. Their emphasis on the historical situation and what meaning the prophecies might have had to the original readers is commendable.

VI. PROBLEMS WITH THE PRETERIST VIEW

- A. The PTs do not entirely escape the special pleading, arbitrariness and exegetical gymnastics of passages that seem to support the FTs. They have some good arguments, but somehow right at key passages something is lacking that prevents one from holding the view with great conviction. It is not unlike the other views in this regard. Each eschatological system seems to leave major questions unanswered. As long as they can be discussed and presented as models,

some modicum of unity of the Body of Christ can be maintained. The problem arises when one of the views presents itself as the hallmark of orthodoxy and is used as an excuse to withhold fellowship.

- B. Perhaps the most serious problem with the PT view is knowing how to distinguish between the *already* and the *is not*. What is a sure-fire way to distinguish between the First Century judgement and the future glorious appearing?

VII. SUMMARY

The PT view in our opinion has plausibility and should be reckoned with, not ignored. In particular, the question of the date of Revelation needs further study. The hermeneutical questions about partial, or multiple fulfillment need further study. There is a need for intellectual honesty and friendly intermural debate.

What does not change, and will never change, is the fact that the Lord Jesus will return and consummate His Kingdom.

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore, encourage each other with these words. (I Thess. 4:16-18).

FOR FURTHER STUDY

To access internet websites on this subject go to:

<http://www.angelfire.com/ca/deafpreterist/preterism.html>

And It Came To Pass. (Bound volume of Symposium papers published by Canon Press)

Chilton, David. ***Paradise Restored.***

Chilton, David. ***The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation.***

DeMar, Gary. ***Last Days Madness.***

Fairbairn, Patrick. ***The Interpretation of Prophecy.***

Farrar, Frederic W. ***The Early Days of Christianity.***

Gentry, Kenneth L. Jr. ***Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation.***

Gentry, Kenneth L. Jr. ***The Beast of Revelation.***

Kik, Marcellus. ***An Eschatology of Victory.***

Robinson, John A.T. ***Redating the New Testament.***

Russell, Stuart J. ***The Parousia.***

Terry, Milton. *Biblical Apocalypics*.