Full-Preterism and the Revelation Time-Statements
An Exegesis of Revelation 1:1
~by~
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PRETERIST-REALISM
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Introduction
It is generally held by Full-Preterists, that the book of Revelation gives clear time-statements that demand a first-century fulfillment. By this, they commonly hold that all the events of Revelation must have been exhausted by AD 70. Patrick Stone, may he live unto the Lord, accurately defines the position,

"Full Preterism takes LITERALLY the time statements in the New Testament that the Tribulation and His Return would occur ‘shortly’ (Rev 1:1) & in ‘that generation’ (Matt 24:34)"

In his definition, he cites Revelation 1:1—and by implication verse 22:6—as a basis for the Full-Preterist position that the events prophesied in the book of Revelation would be fulfilled in the first-century in toto. This view is shared by prominent Full-Preterists such as Don Preston. Comparing a word in Revelation 1:1 and 22:6 with its root-word usage in other passages, Ward Fenley writes,

"…we can only conclude that the apostle John was initiating the Apocalypse with the urgent warning that Christ was returning in a brief space of time."

Fenley’s thought, written years ago, presumes that the events of Revelation may be summed up in a return of Christ that would be exhausted in a short period of time. Fenley makes no distinction between the terminus ad quem from the terminus a quo. That is, he focuses Revelation 1:1 and 22:6’s “soon” to refer to the soon beginning and end of all the events of the book of Revelation. The fact is Full-Preterists generally believe that all Bible prophecy—including the events of the book of Revelation in toto—was fulfilled shortly after John wrote the scroll. This is common in Full-Preterism. It is an a fortiori argument\(^1\) to prove that Christ has returned by suggesting that all the events in the book of Revelation were fulfilled shortly. The

\(^1\) An argument from the stronger reason—viz. from the greater to the lesser.
interval between the beginning and the end of the fulfillment is reduced to a snapshot of events that would be exhausted in a short time.

This trend is repeated by other Full-Preterists. Kurt Simmons writes,

“The nearness of Christ’s return is repeated over and over throughout Revelation in unmistakable terms, saying [...] the things of the prophecy "must shortly come to pass" (Rev. 1:1; 22:6).

There is nothing difficult in any of this language; all who will may plainly see that Jesus and his apostles taught the first century church to be in earnest expectation of the Lord’s return.”

Here Simmons uses Revelation 1:1 and 22:6 as a proof text. The events of the book of Revelation, what he calls “the things of the prophecy”, have Christ’s return appended. It is granted that the return of Christ is prophesied in the book of Revelation, but by arguing from the greater to the lesser, the Full-Preterist sidestep the category of time interval in all the prophecies, by focusing on a single event accepted as a short duration. Simmons equates the nearness of the realization of the events in the book of Revelation to the nearness of their completion. Michael Fenemore explains using the same assumptions,

“The revelation of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:1) promised the persecuted first-century Christians that the fulfillment of the events predicted therein was “near” [...] Clearly, Jesus did predict a first-century return.”

Indeed, Full-Preterism’s contention that Revelation 1:1 and 22:6 presents a challenge for Futurists who hold that the majority of the book refers to future events. The very first chapter of the book gives a prefatory introduction to the entire account—suggesting that its purpose is to show what “must shortly come to pass”. This is repeated at the close of the book, immediately followed by emphasis for keeping the sayings of the book. The sense is that these propositions act like sorts of book ends that encompass the body of prophesies.

Futurists offer common explanations for this wrench in their gears, but in such attempts they often fail to offer a hermeneutically sound alternative. Simply offering another opinion of interpretation—without adequate exegetical evidence—gravely affects the legitimacy of their overall interpretive system. That is, if Futurists are satisfied to accept a doubtable speculation to file the odd ends off their entire system, this would undermine the confidence they demand in the application of their hermeneutic’s particularities. Full-Preterists are, in some respects, right about this point. For if the Futurist argues for a strict literalistic hermeneutic to interpret the motifs of Revelation, but then argues for the future timing of texts that would literally imply past realization, then he/she compromises the coherence of his/her entire system. That is, if the Futurist’s system is characterized by its futurism and literalism, then their hermeneutic should be expected to interpret time statements literally.

Some examples of the Futurist explanation of these verses are (1) that the word “shortly” may depict the “of speed at which an activity or series of events will be accomplished”, (2)
immanency “is from the point of view of God in whose eyes a thousand years are as quick to
pass as a day or a watch of the night”, (3) *EN TAXEI* can mean “with certainty” [or
something else that it does not in fact mean], (4) “Scripture is always written in such a way that
the authors and the readers can believe, and should believe, that Christ will come in their
lifetimes”, and (5) “Everyone will experience the future last-day resurrection right after they
die.”

In each example, the explanation rests on conjecture. There is really no compelling
reason to entertain any of these explanations. They are not even interpretive; they are speculative
ideas that could work, but they are not derived from an exegetical basis. They are apology
apologetics—concessions that attempt to correct the word usage of the writer. For example, as
Don Preston points out in critique on the subject, some Futurists have suggested that “shortly”
(*EN TAXEI*) means “quickly”—but this begs the question for why John used the cognate
adverb, “TAXY”, in another place—why then could John not have just used a better word for
“quickly”? Even though the Futurist explanation may be possible on this matter, it is
nevertheless a weaker interpretation to the Full-Preterist position.

For the second example, the Full-Preterist position wins another bout. Because there is
nothing in the text that suggests that so much interpretation should be packed into a word, the
eisegesis is arbitrary. There is no allusion to Psalms 90:4 in the immediate context. The
interpretation casts a specter looming over every hermeneutical judgment in their system. The
Futurist handles a text that could at anytime be a depiction from God’s perspective—
compromising their literalistic hermeneutic. We wonder—if the Futurist’s interpretive
application of 2 Peter 3:8 rests so loosely—*how then do they interpret the days of the Genesis
Creation and Daniel 12:4’s instructions?* Further—how does one make sense of an actually long
terminus ante quem from God’s perspective? Or, if a thousand years is as one day, then how
should the Futurist interpret the millennium of Revelation 20? Without solid internal evidence,
the best common Futurist arguments are nothing more than fanciful conjecture. The burden of
proof cannot be satisfied unless they can find exegetical reasons for their answer to Full-
Preterism.

The rest of the examples neither deserve further comment, nor warrant any serious
consideration. For such spurious explanations levied by Futurists are dependent on special
pleading—i.e. they rely on the student’s willingness to dismiss the normal rules of hermeneutics
in this case, as if the statement were an anomaly. From the start, they concede that the Full-
Preterists have a case; their efforts in explaining the text are a desperate attempt to contend long
enough for the next round, but they fail to deliver a better explanation on this issue. The true
difficulty is dealing with Full-Preterism’s answer in a way that honors the text and avoids
making the same mistakes that Futurists make. If there is a legitimate alternative to the Full-
Preterist interpretation, it must be dependent on sound exegesis.

**Purpose**

This paper is intended to (1) offer a sound alternative to the Full-Preterist interpretation
of Revelation 1:1 and 22:6, and (2) to demonstrate the speciousness of the Full-Preterist
interpretation.
Revelation 1:1

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John:[the Authorized Version]

The book begins with the heading, “The Revelation” (ἈΠΟΚΛΑΥΨΙϹ)—the subject nominative which literally means “uncovering/unveiling” as a noun. The genitive phrase “of Jesus Christ” (ἸΗΣΟΥ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ) has several usages in the New Testament. The phrase can be objective, possessive, or appositional. The nuance is subtle, but we know that the phrase will be descriptive of the Revelation. The possessive would make sense based on the parenthetical phrase “which God gave to Him”. However, some side with the objective sense, holding that the Revelation is about Jesus Christ. The appositional sense would equate Christ with the Revelation, as He is the Logos of God who is God, and the Spirit of Prophesy. Other applications of the genitive would simply not make sense in this usage.

But although it could be argued that the phrase describes the Revelation in each application, the possessive genitive is in best harmony with the context. The Revelation is Jesus Christ, and is about Jesus Christ as the Spirit of Prophesy—the Scriptures testify of Him—but some of the things that would come to pass (e.g. apostasy and the great whore of Babylon) are not about Jesus Christ. The immediate context, very clearly, carries the sense of possession. The demonstrative pronoun of the parenthetical clause, “which” (HN), refers to the feminine antecedent, i.e. the Revelation. The Revelation is said to be given to Him. Because “God” (Ο ΘΕΟϹ) is in the nominative case, and since the pronoun for the receiver of the giving is distinguished, it is evident that the Father gives the Revelation to the Son. The idea modifying the first phrase is evidently one where the possessive genitive is favored. Thus, the parenthetical clause works as a descriptive modifier of the noun phrase in the title.

The subordinating clause “to show His servants things which must shortly come to pass” is in connection to “the Revelation of Jesus Christ”. Because of the syntactical markers of the subject and the pronoun in the clause “that which God gave unto Him”, the Authorized Version correctly punctuates this part as a parenthetical idea—connecting the purpose of the Revelation, perhaps the reason for the Father delivering it unto Him. The infinitive “to show” (ΔΕΙΛΕΙΑ) is adjectival to describe the subject “the Revelation”. The object of the purpose is the dative “His servants” (ΤΟΙϹ ΔΟΥΛΟΙϹ ΑΥΤΟΥ). There is tremendous ecclesiastical and Christological significance in this part of the verse—but for the sake of brevity, we must address the controversy in question: the time-statement.

The accusative phrase slaps the package on the table. It depicts what the Revelation uncovers. The pronoun “which” (Δ) is plural this time, implying “the things” that would, following this heading, be disclosed in the book. The impersonal verb is translated by the modal “must” (ΔΕΙ). It is in the present tense, showing that when the Revelation was shown unto the servants of God, there was a then present necessity for the fulfillment. The word means that something ought to happen: viz. it is binding. Positing the absolute sovereignty of God, we
understand that God acts with regard to the Church in accordance to His will. We infer that in God’s perfect harmony, the Father’s relationship to the Son, He reveals certain things that were, at the time of disclosure, bound to come about.

The infinitive for “come to pass” (ἰδρέσθαι) is an aorist under the umbrella of the leading verb. The necessity was a present reality, and the ends of that necessity were, then, to be occurring. The aorist semantically marks a perfect whole, i.e. all the things which would be fulfilled. Yet most of the time that this rendering of the word is used in the New Testament, it is ingressive (cf. Matthew 20:26, 24:6, 26:54ff, Mark 1:17, 10:43-44, 13:7, Luke 21:9, John 1:12, 3:9, 5:6, 9:27, 14:29ff, Acts 26:28, Romans 4:18, 7:4, Philippians 1:13, Revelation 4:1). The realization of these events is not terminally exhausted upon their onset. For example, becoming dead to the law, according to Romans 7:4, is a definitive event, but it is ingressive in the sense that those married to one another and bring forth fruit unto God do not cease being dead to the law upon realization of it. One could be said to become a Christian in a definitive conversion, but the Christian life mentioned is not immediately exhausted—it has just begun.

The ingressive aorist is not addressed to make a case for a long duration of the fulfillment of disjointed events. Although there is more than one event depicted in the Revelation, since the demonstrative pronoun “which” (αὐτοῦ) is in the plural, here the aorist takes a snap shot of time. Rather, the Revelation as a whole is of necessity to be realized no matter how long the whole is. The prepositional phrase must function adverbially to describe the terminus ante quem of fulfillment. The ingressive application of the perfective aspect is not to make “shortly” drag on after the onset of the events, but the main verb coupled with the verbal—the [then] present necessity of realization—would be modified by the dative phrase for “shortly” (ἐν ταχείᾳ).

The phrase for “shortly” means “in a brief space of time”. This is a clear time statement of the immanence of the Revelation’s manifestation—not the duration of the fulfillment. Even Full-Preterists argue this point, but they generally assume that the Revelation can be reduced to the events circa AD 70. The reason Full-Preterists would tend to have to agree with my exegesis of the soon-ness of the fulfillment’s realization is because they vehemently are opposed to the Futurist’s retort that the events would quickly be consummated after a long period of time. The stance that they have taken is an argument for first-century realization shortly after the book was written, assuming an early date of authorship. Assuming this position, the “passing” [a word added in translation] of the fulfillment is made dependent on the content of the Revelation—a matter I have raised in my argument against Full-Preterism in favor of the Historic Reformed view in my paper The Extrapolation of the Conflagration of Satan in Full-Preterism.

Conclusion

Full-Preterists are not in error when they use the normal reading to understand that the events of Revelation were soon to be realized in the first-century. However, the exegetical reasons for supposing that premise do not necessarily infer that the events realized in the first-century would be entirely exhausted in the first-century. The word for “come to pass” is most often used as an ingressive aorist, and in this usage it best applies without raising significant textual and interpretive problems. The text may surely be held to teach a first-century realization of the Revelation sent and signified to John. This is congruent with the Historic Reformed position, which understands the book of Revelation to be a practical guide for the Church.
throughout the ages. It is given to the Church for perseverance and hope in every age. We do not need to be troubled by what the Scriptures say. Though they may be misused by those outside of our dogmatic foundation, we must be never deterred from using honest study to stand for the faith.

~SOLI DEO GLORIA~

Bibliography