Exegesis of Matthew 16:27-28 and Preterism

~by~

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Preterist-Realism

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~Introduction~

Don Preston recently débuted video series on a popular video hosting site. The series is a Full-Preterist comparative study on Matthew 16:27-28 with some practical applications from his conclusions. In response to Preston’s first seven videos, I posted a three part series in critical review of some of his points. In my video series I take objection to several of his arguments and his overall methodology. I argue that Preston’s opinions have no exegetical warrant and that he abstracts the verses from their immediate context. Although Preston made a video response addressing my objections, it was clear he did not exegetically support his particular assertions any further.

One contribution that Preston does make, is affirming that verses 27 and 28 of chapter 16 cannot be separated from each other. This is true, but this is not unique to his position. I also hold that the verses cannot be separated. Further, I hold that the “coming” in the verses was fulfilled in the lifetime of most of the disciples. Preston’s video response to objectors is thereby not aimed against me.

In an online exchange, a proponent of “Fulfilled-Eschatology”, Jerry William Bowers Jr., argued that I do indeed separate the last two verses of Matthew 16. Further, he argued that particular applications of my interpretation are not supported by the text. The purpose of this paper is to defend my Preterist interpretation of the passage with exegesis.

~Focus~

Matthew 16:27-28ff does not allow for the Full-Preterist to interpret it as a decisive reference to a local judgment on Jerusalem or any of the events associated with the historical occurrences of c. ad 70. However, it does agree with my Preterist-Realist interpretation.

~Method~
I will exegete the text and give some commentary with relevant applications to support my thesis. By giving attention to the basic rudiments of the text, it will be demonstrated that the text gives no more aid to support the Full-Preterist position than it does any other interpretation.

“For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” (Matthew 16:27-28)

~Exegesis and Commentary~

This text addresses the re-compensation for the sacrifices of the faithful (cf. Matthew 16:23-26ff). There is nothing to gain in this world which is worth the eternal cost of one’s own soul. Jesus assures His disciples that He must be killed and raised, and that they must mind this operation of God because He will be made King and will thereby reward them according to their faithfulness and loyalty. Christ is teaching them that the Gospel will benefit them if they accept it and follow Him. He assures them also of the nearness of the realization of His kingship.

“For...is about to...”

The first clause begins with the main verb for “about to be” (mellei) to express something expected to soon be realized. The verb is in the present active indicative, to express what was then presently about to be. The word is commonly omitted for diction in English translations; understandably, many confuse the infinitive “coming” (erchesthai) as a main transitive verb—sometimes affecting the interpretation thereof. Yet the syntactical position of the leading verb is emphatic enough for the infinitive to be colored by the indicative mood.

The main verb, from the word mello, has the force of a necessary and impending realization for an intended purpose. Yet just because the events of Matthew 16:27-28 were to be realized soon, does not necessarily entail that they would be realized in c. ad 70. It is possible that such events could be realized much earlier that ad 70.

The verb coupled with the conjunction “for” (gar) carries the force of explanation. It subordinates the verse to the preceding one to show continuity of argumentation. Indeed the preceding two verses use the same particle to show continuity of argumentation. Therefore, verse 27 must be dependent on the context of verses 24-26.

“the Son of man shall come”

The complete subject of the first clause is the noun phrase “the Son of man” (ho huios tou). There is no doubt that this was a title the Lord Jesus called Himself in the third person. The infinitive “coming” describes the intent of the Son of man being about to be in the glory of His Father. The verbal must show a correlation to the immediate
context for it to make sense within the argument. It describes why the disciples must
diligently mind the operation of God, i.e. because the Son will ascend to glory. His soon
glorification was an incentive for faithfulness, a deterrent against vanity, and a
pronouncement of His authority and power. His “coming” demands their pledge of
loyalty.

One common error in the interpretation of this text is the mistaking of the
infinitive as a transitive finite verb depicting Christ’s return, whether the return is a
spiritual presence or visible second coming. However, the infinitive describes the leading
verb with reference to Christ’s being.

“…in the glory of His Father”

The prepositional phrase “in the glory of His Father” describes the first part of the
indirect object. The preposition “in” (en) usually refers to a set position; it does not imply
motion. That which Christ comes into is the object of the preposition, viz. “the glory” (tE
doxE). The text does not refer to this category of coming as a return or entrance to earth,
or Jerusalem, or within the hearts of people, or any nonsense like that. The verbs describe
the [then] future destination of Christ with regards to His glorious estate in heaven.¹

The genitive “of His Father” (tou patros autou) modifies the object of the
preposition. The glory that Christ was then presently about to be coming into was the
esteem of the Father. This has no direct reference to the historical events of c. ad 70.

“…with His angels”

The phrase beginning with the preposition “with” (meta) depicts either that the
angels are with the Father or that they will accompany the Son of Man’s coming. Because
the genitive personal pronoun “His” (autou) usually refers to the subject of the sentence
in the normal reading, the antecedent likely is “the Son of Man”. The persons of the
Godhead are clearly distinguished here to account for the theological significance.

The angels are with the Son where the Father is. The syntactic structure of the
phrase suggests the angels are less important that the subject (see Hebrews 2:5-10), but
their idiomatic reference serves an apocalyptic function to address the heavenly majesty
of Christ’s rule. The angels of the Son are never said to come into glory in the active
voice as the Son is, who they are glorified with. Rather, they are pictured as a company of
invited guests or perhaps an army under command.² In Matthew 24-25ff, the Son is said
to come in glory and in the angels who are with Him (Mark 8:38). Yet Matthew 16:27
deals not with their positional glorification, rather it deals with their collective union with
Christ whereby He rewards individuals.³

¹ Cf. Hebrews 9:24
² Cf. Psalms 68:17-18
³ Commentators on Daniel 7:13 commonly agree that “they [who] brought Him [the Son of man] near
before Him [the Ancient of Days]” are the innumerable hosts of angles in heaven. E.g. John Gill, Matthew
Henry.
“…and then”

The second clause is coordinated with the first to show the logical correlation of events and timing. The simple conjunction “and” (kai) coordinates the subordinating ideas of the dependent clause while the adverb “then” (tote) directs the timing of the action.

“He will reward”

The verb “shall reward” (apodOsei) is in the future tense, but it is understood within the restrictive context of that which was “about to be” of the preceding clause. In Preston’s video series, he suggests that the word “reward” is synonymous with the word “judgment”. He appeals to Isaiah 40 and 62 to suggest that those passages define the word “reward” as “judgment”. Yet, such passages do not share the same central theme as Matthew 16:27-28ff. Therefore, they do not constitute the kind of parallel passage that one could make such applications from.

One could argue that the usage of the word “requital” in Isaiah 59:18, and “reward” in Romans 2:6, carry enough similarity to Matthew 16:27 to interpret the meaning of reward as compensation and judgment in Matthew 16:27. However, these texts do indeed have a different central theme than the verse in Matthew, Isaiah 40, and 62. The accusative singular feminine “praxin” of Matthew 16:27 when contrasted from the accusative plural masculine “erga” of Romans 2:6 shows a distinction between the Christian practice of the believer with the wages of the rest of mankind’s work. It is not that Christ does not judge the wicked from His throne—He certainly does! Nonetheless, the judgment part (spoken of clearly in texts like Isaiah 59:18, Romans 2:6, etc.) is not directly correlated with the participle “coming” of Matthew 16:28, a verbal modifying the accusative.

If the Son of Man’s entering into glory was realized at the ascension,⁴ then in aeviternity Christ’s rewarding is fulfilled. His operation was then not fulfilled because in all reality He had not yet entered into His kingdom to perform His duties granted unto Him. Thus, Christ speaks in the text of a future fulfillment whereby He has since accomplished from aeviternity. Because His operation outside of time is not spoken of in the progressive tense, it is prophesied as a definitive act. Yet for the elect who are scattered throughout all ages in history, the subjective realization of their going to be with Christ is progressive in time.

The actual work of rewarding is fulfilled from aeviternity; the reception of rewards in the intermediate state is immediate upon physical death and lasting.⁵ There is

⁴ Cf. Daniel 7:13-14
⁵ The rewards are immediate- the Scriptures teach that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.
virtually no way to determine precisely what the nature of the rewards for the just are, nor how they are enjoyed. The text simply does not entertain the idea, reserving such knowledge for the elect in the rewards themselves. Yet the Bible does indicate that they will be proportional in some regards to the work they sanction. This is enough to satisfy a meditation on the central theme to formulate doctrinal principles to govern practice and instruction. Yet this text is also commonly appealed to by Full-Preterists to support their claim that this text teaches that Christ’s Second Coming and final Judgment occurred in that contemporary generation before some of the disciples died physically.  

“…in the glory of His Father…”

Like Matthew 25:31, the preposition “in” (en) modifies His coming to express what the Son of Man does. It expresses the same theme; that Christ assumes glory. In Matthew 25:31, the Son of Man comes in His glory which was given to Him by the Father. The text of Matthew 16:27 reveals from whom the glory is of and Matthew 25:31 reveals who has assumed the glory. The same glory is unto God: unto the Father, and unto the Son, and unto the Holy Spirit; but the Son’s glory proceeds from the Father.

“…He will reward each according to his works.”

The explicative pronoun “He”, implied by the verb, refers to the antecedent “the Son of Man” which is the subject of the previous clause. Thus, it is not the Father who personally does the rewarding, but Christ. The Lord is speaking in the third person to depict what He will accomplish. Although rewards could be either positive or negative, rewards in this usage refers to the sanctions of the Covenant in the blessing of the faithful.

The rewards are lasting- the Scriptures teach that some of the elect still alive and remaining unto the Second Coming of the Lord will be caught up. Therefore, the completion of the intermediate state does not terminate the enjoyment of rewards because those raised-up before physically dying are due their full reward just as the rest of the body are blessed. For our crown is an incorruptible crown.

Full-Preterist Michael Fenemore notes “Jesus knew the approximate time of his return and the judgment. He guaranteed they would occur within the lifetime of his contemporaries…” Jesus Predicted a First-Century Return

The verb is “come” (elthE). This coming is modified by the prepositional phrase “in His glory” to distinguish it from the coming mentioned in the preceding chapter which is with glory. The glory He assumes when He comes in it is the glory He thereby comes with thereafter.

This is the glory the Son was given of the Father (Matthew 16:27, John 17:1-2, 5, 22, 24, etc.). It becomes His own glory to give to the angels by the Father who gives it to Him (Mark 16:19-20, Luke 22:29-30, John 17:22-26, Romans 6:4, 8:18-30, 9:23, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Ephesians 3:16). Therefore, this clause addresses the timing of when the glory would be assumed, not a description of the Son when He comes. The preposition modifies the action to describe the resulting ends of the coming, not how He comes.

John 17:5, 2 Peter 1:17

The Belgic Confession states,

“When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, we are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do. In the meantime, we do not deny that God rewards our good works, but it is through His grace that He crowns His gifts.” (Article 24)
Because the measure of the reward is in some respect proportional to the works of each one, the reward’s benefit is dependent on the receiver’s conduct and faithfulness. The substantive adjective “each” (hekastO) could refer to each of the angels. But much more likely, the antecedent is the subject of the previous verse, i.e. the “man” (ei tis anthrOpos). According to the central theme in verses 16:25-26, which accounts for the loss and gain of individuals according to their own works, the possessive pronoun “his” of the last clause of verse 16:27 would make no relevant application if it referred to Christ or the Father. Therefore, the normal reading of this text in context depicts Christ’s rewarding to every individual of people in general, but especially the faithful.

“Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.”

Don Preston argues that the phrase “assuredly, I say to you” (amEn lgO humin) shows an emphasis and connexion of this verse (v. 28) to the preceding verse (v. 27). This is no doubt true.

In verse 16:28, Jesus declares to His disciples (v. 24) that they can be assured by His testimony that some would even live to witness Him come in glory. The immediate audience is firmly established first by the clause “I say unto you” and secondly by the clause “there are some standing here”. The crux of their assurance is not of things that were remote and abstract, but that Christ personally and directly spoke to them of things that would soon be realized in history.

The notable prepositional phrase “in His Kingdom” correlates with the previous verse’s “in the glory of the Father”. This but confirms our interpretation. The object of the preposition also functions as the indirect object of the clause. The coming describes Christ being in His Kingdom. The Kingdom is not earthly Jerusalem. The preposition “in” (en), again, does not mean “from” or “out of”. Nor did Christ have to wait until c. ad 70 to assume the right hand of God. Scripture is very clear that Christ went to His Kingdom at the time of His ascension to glory.11

The disciples did not see Christ come in His kingdom while they were living on earth, for His kingdom is not of this world. Nonetheless, some saw His coming in some sense. They actually visibly saw Him when they witnessed His ascension.12 The present participle “coming” (erchomenon) functions as an object of the verb “see” (idOsin). It is in the accusative singular masculine to describe the Son of man who will come. The disciples may not have lived to see the Son of Man reward all the souls of men from His kingdom while they were on earth, but they did see Him assume glory at the right hand of God when He ascended into heaven.

~Conclusion~

For Bowers and Preston to argue their position, he would have to grammatically show that the “judgment” is limited to the time whereby some of the disciples would live to see the ends thereof. However, the grammatical and syntactical structure restricts their “seeing” (v. 28) of the direct object’s state of being [becoming at the right hand of God] to be realized before they die. The rewarding is not restricted to their seeing. This is critical because Bowers and Preston aim to make a direct correlation between judgment being exhausted and the lifetime of the disciples. However, exegetically, this is not possible—which is why Bowers, Preston and others must abstract whole verses, stripping them of their grammatical form and contextual relevance, and isolate them into parallel events to make undue inferences from.

In summary,

1) The Full-Preterist interpretation which holds that Matthew 16:27-28 were fulfilled in Christ's coming in judgment against Jerusalem does not make sense of the immediate context.

2) The conjunction "gar" in verses 25-27 demonstrates continuity by argumentation. Verses 27-28 are explanatory conclusions of the preceding section which is centrally themed about the re-compensation for the sacrifices of the faithful. The interpretation that this pericope is about judgment is unsatisfactory.

3) The emphasized imminence of the realization of the Son of man's coming into glory (v.27) is delayed until c. ad 70 in common Full-Preterist interpretations. The transfiguration would be too near, but the time of the ascension makes better sense.

4) The infinitive "coming" in verse 27 does not make sense of the context in common Full-Preterist interpretations.

5) The text does not refer to this category of coming as a return or entrance to earth, or Jerusalem, or within the hearts of people, or any nonsense like that. The verbs describe the [then] future destination of Christ with regards to His glorious estate in heaven. Jesus said, "I go to the Father, and you know the way..."

6) The verb "reward" in verse 27 does not mean "judgment" in this context. The rewarding is said to happen at the time He enters the Father's glory (which was at the ascension). The rewarding of all the faithful must be both outside of time and comprehensive of all Christians in due time.

7) The coming of verse 28 is said to be in His Kingdom, not earthly Jerusalem.

8) Christ ascended to glory in His Kingdom long before ad 70.

9) The disciples, if they indeed fled into the mountains, cannot be said to have actually seen the judgment upon Jerusalem.