

A CRITIQUE OF PRETERISM

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, many people have been influenced by predictions of the soon coming of Jesus Christ. The present writer can remember family discussions about the restoration of Israel and the possibility of the return of Christ before 1988 which provoked both fear and fascination in his young (and then unbelieving) mind. For many years, that young mind simply assumed the coming of Christ could occur at any moment.

Consequently, it came as a surprise to learn that not everyone saw things the same way in the Christian community. A gradual exposure to the teaching known as preterism introduced the writer to a different mindset--one that asserted that Christ had *already* come again. The present study grew out of the questions that ensued from exposure to that teaching, as well as questions that have been put to the writer regarding preterism.

A full discussion of the many implications of preterism would be a fitting topic for a book, and this paper makes no attempt to give such a discussion. The more modest goal for now is to examine the preterist interpretation of the Olivet Discourse found in Matthew 24-25. While that method will not answer all the questions raised by preterism, it will allow a discussion of the key principles that underlie preterist thought--particularly its historical, hermeneutical, and exegetical principles. After the preterist view has been set forth from the writings of its main proponents, a detailed evaluation will follow.

I. AN EXAMINATION OF PRETERISM

Some Key Terms

The word “preterist” comes from the Latin term *praeteritus*, which means “gone by,” or past.¹ Among other things, preterists believe that Jesus’ predictions in Matthew 24-25 (the “Olivet Discourse”) were fulfilled in A. D. 70 during the destruction of Jerusalem. Their position is grounded in their interpretation of certain “time references” in Matthew 10:23,² 16:28,³ and 24:34,⁴ which they believe demand that Jesus’ prophecies be fulfilled within the lifetime of His hearers.⁵ Preterists also maintain that the book of Revelation was written before A. D. 70 and finds its fulfillment in the destruction of Jerusalem.⁶

At this juncture, it is important to distinguish between *full* (sometimes called *consistent, radical, or hyper-*) *preterism* and *partial* (sometimes called *moderate*) *preterism*. R. C. Sproul distinguishes between the two as follows: Full preterists see virtually all New Testament eschatology as having been realized already--including the return of Christ, the

¹ Kenneth Gentry, “The Great Tribulation Is Past,” in *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 13.

² “But whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to the next; for truly I say to you, you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel, until the Son of Man comes.”

³ “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.”

⁴ “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.”

⁵ R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 24-25.

⁶ Kenneth Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*, 3d ed., (Atlanta: American Vision, 1999). There are several weaknesses in the position which have been ably stated. For a brief treatment, see Richard Mayhue, “Jesus: A Preterist or Futurist?” Paper presented to the Evangelical Theological Society, Danvers, MA; November, 1999. For a more thorough critique, see Robert Thomas, “Theonomy and the Dating of the Revelation,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 5 (Spring 1994), 185-202; and *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 20-23. Further discussion of the dating of Revelation is beyond the scope of this paper.

resurrection, and the final judgment.⁷ Moderate preterists believe that the Second Coming of Christ and the bodily resurrection are still future, but agree that the Tribulation period described in the Olivet Discourse, as well as the coming of Christ in Matthew 24:29-31, was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70.⁸ The present paper will limit its discussion to moderate preterism, since full preterism is properly classified as heretical given its departure from orthodox Christianity on so many points.⁹

A Brief History of Preterism

The first preterist interpretation of the Olivet Discourse is often attributed to Eusebius (263-339) in his *Ecclesiastical History* and *The Proof of the Gospel*.¹⁰ After quoting Josephus' account of the destruction of Jerusalem at length, Eusebius writes:

⁷ Keith Mathison goes into further detail as he describes the doctrine of full preterists. He says the essential defining doctrine of full preterism is that all eschatological events, such as the Second Coming and the Last Judgment, took place at the destruction of Jerusalem. He then quotes Edward Stevens in listing seventeen propositions that summarize the full preterist position: 1. The kingdom has arrived. 2. The kingdom is spiritual. 3. The kingdom must be entered and dwelt in through spiritual means. 4. All things written about Christ in the Old Testament have been fulfilled (Luke 21:22). 5. The Great Commission has been fulfilled (Matt. 28:18-20). 6. All things have been made new (Rev. 21:5). 7. The scheme of redemption has been consummated. 8. The old heavens and earth have passed away, and the new heavens and earth are here (Matt. 5:17-20). 9. The time of reformation has occurred (Heb. 9:10). 10. Christ has returned. 11. The "perfect" has come (1 Cor. 13:10; Eph. 4:13). 12. The first covenant became obsolete and disappeared (Heb. 8:13). 14. The mystery is finished (Rom. 16:25-26; 1 Cor. 2:6-8; Eph. 3:4-10; Rev. 10:7). 15. Death and hades have been thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:13-14). 16. All things have been "restored" (Acts 3:21). 17. Armageddon is past. Keith Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999), 235-36; quoting Edward Stevens, "Doctrinal Implications of Preterist Eschatology," unpublished paper.

⁸ Sproul, *The Last Days*, 24, 68, 153-70. Cf. Kenneth Gentry, Jr., "A Brief Theological Analysis of Hyper-Preterism," *Chalcedon Report*, 384 (July 1997) 22-24, in which he declares full preterism to be heterodox and outside the creedal orthodoxy of Christianity.

⁹ Cf. Gentry, "A Brief Theological Analysis of Hyper-Preterism," 22-24.

¹⁰ Thomas Ice, "Back to the Future: Keeping the Future in the Future," in *The Return*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy J. Demy, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 15.

All this occurred in this manner, in the second year of the reign of Vespasian [69-79], according to the predictions of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who by his divine power foresaw all these things as if already present at the time, who wept and mourned indeed, at the prospect, as the holy evangelists show in their writings.¹¹

Ice indicates that the first systematic presentation of the preterist viewpoint appeared in 1614 by Alcazar, a Jesuit friar. He influenced the first Protestant preterist, Hugo Grotius of Holland, whose work appeared in 1644. Preterism first appeared in England through a commentary by Henry Hammond in 1653.¹²

Modern preterist writers claim that a number of well-known scholars from the Reformation to the present are in their camp, including John Calvin (1509-1564), John Lightfoot (1601-1675), John Owen (1616-1683), Matthew Henry (1662-1714), John Gill (1697-1771), Thomas Scott (1747-1821), Adam Clarke (1762-1832), Moses Stuart (1780-1852), J. A. Alexander (1809-1860), Albert Barnes (1798-1870), Philip Schaff (1819-1893), David Brown (1803-1897), F. W. Farrar (1831-1903), Milton Terry (1840-1914), Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921), J. Marcellus Kik (1903-1965), and Loraine Boettner (1903-1989).¹³

The paucity of names that Gentry lists from the past century is notable. Indeed, preterism has largely been off the theological radar screen for many years. It did not even

¹¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.7.1, in *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, translated by Christian Frederick Cruse, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), reprint ed. Gentry believes Origen (185-254) was also a preterist. "The Great Tribulation Is Past," 13.

¹² Ice, "Back to the Future," 16.

¹³ Gentry, "The Great Tribulation Is Past," 13. Verification of his claim is difficult due to his lack of supporting citations. In any event, a full-fledged history of preterism is beyond the scope of the immediate paper. Given its recent rise in prominence, further research on this issue would be valuable, particularly to assess preterism's relationship to the optimistic postmillennialism of the 19th century and to evaluate the extent to which these past scholars would support preterism as it has been developed by its modern proponents.

merit a separate entry in such standard works as *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (1960),¹⁴ *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (1984),¹⁵ and *New Dictionary of Theology* (1988).¹⁶

Even the more recent, eschatologically-focused work *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* (1996) does not have a separate entry for preterism.¹⁷

As shown below in this paper, however, preterism has been making inroads into evangelicalism in the past few years, with several works questioning futuristic views on eschatology. The Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24-25 has received wide discussion in preterist literature, presenting the need to assess the preterist interpretation in greater detail.¹⁸

¹⁴ Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960).

¹⁵ Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984).

¹⁶ Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988). The fact that preterism may have been mentioned in passing as a historical footnote in commentaries on Revelation does not obscure the present point. If, as the preterists claim, their interpretation of the Olivet Discourse is so irrefutably clear, it is surprising that the first two centuries of church history and virtually the entire past century of scholarly work missed the point.

¹⁷ Mal Couch, ed. *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996). This work does make a passing reference to preterism under the entry "Reconstructionism, Christian," by Thomas D. Ice.

¹⁸ The constraints of the present paper will limit the remaining discussion to a presentation and critique of the preterist view. A defense of the futurist view of the Olivet Discourse is beyond the scope of this paper. For futurist treatments of the Olivet Discourse see Paul Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 317-20; Stanley D. Toussaint, "Are the Church and the Rapture in Matthew 24?", in *The Return*, edited by Thomas Ice and Timothy J. Demy (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 122-36; and Bruce Ware, "Is the Church in View in Matthew 24-25?", in *Vital Prophetic Issues*, edited by Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1995), 185-98. For a popular, yet helpful and detailed, treatment, see John F. MacArthur, *The Second Coming*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999).

The Preterist View of the Olivet Discourse

The preterist interpretation of the Olivet Discourse is represented in the writings of R. C. Sproul,¹⁹ Kenneth Gentry,²⁰ and Gary DeMar.²¹ These men have generated substantial literature on the topic, with DeMar's tome on preterism exceeding 500 pages. The volume of this material makes a verse-by-verse review of their entire interpretation impractical for the present paper. Consequently, the present approach will be to outline the basic preterist understanding of the Olivet Discourse and explain their treatment of Matthew 24:34, which they consider to be the key verse in the entire passage. The exegetical effect of that interpretation on the rest of the Discourse will be illustrated with specific examples from other verses.

Jewish Judgment: The Preterist's Theme for Matthew's Gospel

The preterist prefaces his interpretation of the Olivet Discourse with an emphasis on the Jewish concern of Matthew's gospel.²² He notes that it opens with a reference to Jesus' ancestry through David back to Abraham (1:1). He then emphasizes Matthew's presentation of judgment against Israel. John the Baptist calls Israel to repentance for her sin (3:1-2, 6) and rebukes her religious leaders (3:7-9). Israel's lack of faith is contrasted with Jesus' amazement at a Gentile's faith--faith that He did not find with anyone in Israel. Although

¹⁹ Sproul, *The Last Days*, 29-48.

²⁰ Gentry, "The Great Tribulation Is Past," 33-66.

²¹ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 3d ed. (Atlanta: American Vision, 1997). DeMar's book is now in its fourth edition (1999). For purposes of this paper, DeMar will be considered a partial preterist although he does not distance himself from full preterism in the book. His book is apparently self-published, since he is the president of American Vision.

²² For greater simplicity, Gentry's summary of Matthew's theme will be taken as representative of other preterists with the understanding that preterists may have points of disagreement between themselves on some of the details.

many will come from east and west and recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness (8:10-13).²³

Later, Jesus compares Israel to pagan cities of old (11:16-24), and says that the men of Nineveh and the Queen of the South would stand up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it (12:38-45). Jesus castigates Israel's rulers by saying, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me" (15:8).²⁴

Then, beginning in chapter 21, Matthew "starts piling up judgment material." Jesus cleanses the temple of its corrupting influences (21:12-16) and curses the fig tree, indicating the imminent judgment against the nation (21:19-20, 42-45). He castigates Israel's rulers for their long-standing opposition to God's prophets, and indicates that God will withdraw His kingdom from them and bestow it upon "a nation producing the fruit of it" (21:23-46). Jesus then proclaims the parable of the marriage feast, which recounts Israel's resistance to God's call, and predicts the gathering of other guests (the Gentiles) to the feast (22:1-14).²⁵

Chapter 23 then sets the stage for the Olivet Discourse by calling down seven woes upon Israel's religious leaders. God's vengeance will crash down against all those who shed innocent blood in first-century Israel (23:36). Jesus then leaves the temple and pronounces that Israel's house is being left to her desolate (23:37-38). After leaving the temple, Jesus heads for the Mount of Olives (24:1). The disciples ask him the questions that spark the Olivet Discourse: "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age (24:3)?"²⁶

²³ Gentry, "The Great Tribulation is Past," 17-18.

²⁴ Ibid, 19.

²⁵ Ibid, 19-20.

²⁶ Ibid, 20-25. Gentry avoids any mention of Matthew 23:39 and moves directly into Matthew 24. That omission is significant and will be addressed below.

Consequently, the preterist emphasizes Matthew's theme of judgment on Israel as he prepares to interpret the Olivet Discourse. God's judgment will bring great tribulation upon the nation, and to the preterist, the timing of that tribulation is found in 24:34: "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."

The preterist insists that Matthew 24:34 is "indisputably clear" that God's judgment on Israel will occur in the first-century, based on the forty-year length of a biblical generation. Since Jesus was speaking sometime around A. D. 30, fulfillment must have occurred by A. D. 70. The preterist finds that in the Roman army's destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70.²⁷ Obviously, everything rides on Matthew 24:34 for the preterist. Understanding his interpretation of that verse is central to understanding his view of the Olivet Discourse.

Preterist Interpretation of Matthew 24:34

Matthew 24:34 says, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place." Its importance to preterist interpretation can scarcely be overstated. Gentry calls it "the key to locating the Great Tribulation in history,"²⁸ that must be understood as a "nonapocalyptic, nonpoetic, unambiguous, didactic assertion."²⁹ Combined with Matthew's thematic development, Matthew 24:34 is "alone sufficient to locate the Great Tribulation in the first century."³⁰ As such, it is the "all-important *key* text" for understanding the Olivet Discourse.³¹

²⁷ Ibid, 24-27.

²⁸ Ibid, 26.

²⁹ Ibid, 28.

³⁰ Ibid, 33.

³¹ Ibid, 65 (emphasis in original).

R. C. Sproul is also adamant about the importance of Matthew 24:34. Quoting J. Stuart Russell, he states, “No violence can extort from [it] any other sense than the obvious and unambiguous one, viz. that our Lord’s second coming would take place within the limits of the existing generation.”³² It is a line around prophecy “so plain and palpable, shutting it wholly within a limit so definite and distinct, that it ought to be decisive of the whole question.”³³ Indeed, “99 persons in every 100 would immediately understand Jesus to mean that the events he was predicting would fall within the limits of the lifetime of an existing generation.”³⁴ In summary, if Matthew 24:34 is taken at face value, “either all the content of Jesus’ Olivet Discourse, including the *parousia* he describes here, have already taken place (in some sense), or at least some of Jesus’ prophecy failed to take place within the time-frame assigned to it.”³⁵

Gary DeMar adds, “If Jesus said that all the events prior to Matthew 24:34 would occur before the contemporary generation (within forty years) passed away, then we must take Him at His word...An honest assessment of Scripture can lead to no other conclusion. The integrity of the Bible is at stake in the discussion of the biblical meaning of ‘this generation.’”³⁶

Why do preterists find this interpretation so compelling? Gentry offers a seven-point argument in support of a first-century fulfillment of Matthew 24:4-35:³⁷

³² J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord’s Second Coming*, (London: Unwin, 1887), reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 539-40; quoted in Sproul, *The Last Days*, 25.

³³ Russell, *The Parousia*, 83-84; quoted in Sproul, *The Last Days*, 47.

³⁴ Sproul, *The Last Days*, 53 (alluding to Russell).

³⁵ *Ibid*, 64.

³⁶ DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 73.

³⁷ Gentry, “The Great Tribulation Is Past,” 28-32. It should be noted that Gentry only argues for an A. D. 70 fulfillment of Matthew 24:4-35. He views the rest of the discourse as

1. The first-century temple is the focus of the disciples' question (Matthew 24:1-2a).
2. The first-century temple is, in fact, destroyed in Jesus' generation.
3. The warning embedded in the prophecy indicates the primary focus of the events (Matthew 24:16). By telling His followers to flee to the mountains, Jesus was confining the scope of His prophecy.
4. "This generation" indisputably applies to the scribes and Pharisees earlier in the context (Matthew 23:36).
5. The first mention of "generation" in Matthew uses the Greek term in the sense of a life span (Matthew 1:17).
6. "Generation" is used elsewhere in Matthew (and the other gospels) of those living in Christ's day (Matthew 12:38-39; Matthew 17:17). (This point is especially important to preterists.)
7. The phrase "this generation" elsewhere in Matthew points to the contemporary generation of Christ's own day (Matthew 11:16; 12:40-45).

These contextual factors drive the preterist to understand "generation" in a manner that will not permit a fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy after the first century. DeMar believes that to take Matthew 24:34 as referring to anything other than Jesus' immediate contemporaries is to violate the way the phrase is used in every other place in Matthew and the New Testament.³⁸ Sproul, on the other hand, is less adamant. He believes the other uses of "this generation" as referring to Jesus' contemporaries are "weighty," but not conclusive.³⁹

Based on that understanding of "this generation," the preterist proceeds to explain that "all these things" simply refers to everything mentioned in 24:4-33. The "Great

still future, believing that Jesus begins to look forward to the future in Matthew 24:36. "The Great Tribulation Is Past," 26. For a response to the essential content of these seven points, see the next chapter under the heading "Does Sound Exegesis Support Preterism?"

³⁸ DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 72.

³⁹ Sproul, *The Last Days*, 62.

Tribulation” of verse 21 describes the events that must occur in “this generation.”⁴⁰ Sproul adds:

If both “this generation” and “all these things” are taken at face value, then either all the content of Jesus’ Olivet Discourse, including the *parousia* he describes here, have already taken place (in some sense), or at least some of Jesus’ prophecy failed to take place within the time-frame assigned to it.⁴¹

The preterists generally do little exegesis on the term “shall not pass away.” Gentry only notes that the phrase has a strong double negative (οὐ μή) which carries great emphasis heightened by its position in the sentence. Since a generation was reckoned as forty years in the Old Testament, Jesus was emphatically insisting that the events of 24:4-33 would occur within forty years.⁴² In effect, the preterist looks ahead to Matthew 24:34 as he is reading the chapter, and then retroactively applies it to the interpretation of the preceding section. The effect of that interpretive method now follows.

Preterist Interpretation of Other Selected Passages in the Olivet Discourse

A reader previously unacquainted with preterist writings will no doubt wonder how they could claim past fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse, when so much of its language seems to refer to the future. The preterist’s understanding of Matthew 24:34 is the

⁴⁰ Gentry, “The Tribulation Is Past,” 27, 65. Noticeably absent in Gentry’s discussion at these points is the relationship of “all these things” in verses 33 and 34, and his proof that the antecedent of “all these things” incorporates the entire discourse from 24:4-34.

⁴¹ Sproul, *The Last Days*, 64-65. Sproul equivocates on what remains future in his understanding of preterism: “I must confess that I am still unsettled on some crucial matters. I am convinced that the substance of the Olivet Discourse was fulfilled in A. D. 70 and that the bulk of Revelation was likewise fulfilled in that time-frame. I share Gentry’s concerns about full preterism, particularly on such issues as the consummation of the kingdom and the resurrection of the dead.” Sproul, *The Last Days*, 158.

⁴² Gentry, “The Great Tribulation Is Past,” 27. Of course, the double negative would be emphatic even if a futurist interpretation was adopted. The argument in this respect is not unique to preterism.

presupposition that determines the timing of the fulfillment of Matthew 24:4-33. Nothing can contradict that presupposition.

Consequently, when the ordinary sense of a passage in that section of the Olivet Discourse seems future, the preterist understands it to be using figurative language to refer to a now-past event. Biblical cross-references are used to support the figurative interpretation, which is then buttressed with citations to ancient historians (especially Josephus). These historical citations lend credibility to the figurative interpretation of past fulfillment. To illustrate that preterist methodology, the preterist interpretation of Matthew 24:15-18 and Matthew 24:29-31 will now be examined.

Matthew 24:15-18

In Matthew 24:15-18, Jesus spoke about the abomination of desolation found in Daniel 9:26-27:

Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down to get the things out that are in his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to get his cloak.

The preterist says that the “abomination of desolation” refers not to an individual, but rather to an abuse of worship in the Jerusalem temple that occurred during the Roman siege of Jerusalem. Gentry writes:

During the Roman siege, the Zealots hole up in Jerusalem, and stir up factional infighting between the parties of John of Gischala, Eleazar, and Simon. Even while Jerusalem’s mighty walls resist the Romans, this internal strife brings war into the holy temple itself.⁴³

Gentry then quotes Josephus, who recorded that the Jewish in-fighting was so bad that 8500 people perished in the conflict. The Zealots went through the temple and used the

sacred wine and distributed it to the people. But even beyond the Zealots, the preterist sees fulfillment in the Roman soldiers, whose ensigns of eagles violated Jewish sensibilities about images. Their presence in a time of war would be an abomination (i.e., the ensigns of eagles) leading to “desolation” (i.e., the destruction of the temple).⁴⁴

Preterists believe that after Jesus gave this prediction about the coming destruction of Jerusalem, He proceeded to advise the Christians in Judea to flee to the mountains for safety when they saw the Roman army beginning to surround Jerusalem (24:16-18). Preterists sprinkle Josephus’ descriptions of Roman troop movements during the siege throughout their exposition to lend historical authenticity to this interpretation. Gentry concludes: “In A. D. 70, the Roman “eagles” gather over the corpse of Jerusalem to pick it clean (24:28).”⁴⁵

Matthew 24:29-31

Another helpful illustration of the preterist interpretive methodology can be found in their treatment of Matthew 24:29-31:

But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

By their own admission, this is a difficult passage for preterists to interpret. The cosmic disturbances seem too catastrophic to apply to A. D. 70. However, Gentry sidesteps the difficulty by appealing to a figurative interpretation. He says the verses must be

⁴³ Ibid, 47.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 47-48; cf. Sproul, *The Last Days*, 39-41.

⁴⁵ Gentry, “The Great Tribulation Is Past,” 48-50.

interpreted “*covenantally*, which is to say *biblically*, rather than according to a presupposed simple literalism.”⁴⁶

Gentry argues that the apocalyptic language of Matthew 24:29-31 is a dramatic way of expressing national calamity. He quotes Isaiah’s prophecy of judgment against Babylon in Isaiah 13:10, 13 in support: “For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be darkened in its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine... Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth will move out of her place.” He adds Ezekiel 32:2, 7-8; Jeremiah 4:11, 23-24, 29; and Joel 2:1, 10 to his list of illustrations.⁴⁷

Based on those Old Testament examples, the preterist argues that Christ’s use of similar imagery in Matthew 24:29 should be understood the same way. Jesus is not literally speaking about an upheaval of the heavens; He is using poetic language to describe the impending destruction of Jerusalem. “In a sense, it is “the end of the world” for those nations God judges. So is it with Israel in A. D. 70: her time of God’s favor ends, and her temple system vanishes from history.”⁴⁸

But what about Matthew 24:30, which speaks of the sign of the Son of Man appearing in the sky? Gentry further argues that the NASB has inaccurately translated οὐρανός as “sky.” Instead, it should be understood as “heaven.” The temple’s final destruction is the sign that the Son of Man is in heaven, God’s racial focus on Israel has ended, the land promises are over, and the typological ministry is fading away.⁴⁹

The preterist then asserts that this “sign” was not a world-wide phenomenon, because the “tribes of the earth” (πᾶσαι αἱ φυλαὶ τῆς γῆς) refers not to all people everywhere but

⁴⁶ Ibid, 55 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁷ Ibid, 55-56.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 56-57.

to “the tribes of the land”--i.e., the twelve tribes of Israel.⁵⁰ There is no need for a visual sign over all the earth, for the sign was only to Israel. Further, the “coming” described in this passage is not a physical coming, but rather a “judgment coming” based on Old Testament imagery. It is a reference to the ascension. To the preterist, then, Matthew 24:30 shows that the destruction of Jerusalem proved that the rejected Christ had now been vindicated as the ascended Lord who has great power and glory.⁵¹

One might wonder how the first century Jews were supposed to *see* this judgment coming if it was a heavenly vindication of Christ, as opposed to a literal event in the sky that could be seen with the naked eye. The preterist argues that the “seeing” in Matthew 24:30 does not occur with the organ of vision. Instead, the Jews would *understand* (as we “see” the solution to a math problem) that the temple destruction is proof of Jesus’ judgment against the nation.”⁵² With the Old Covenant system destroyed, the “angels” were now free to gather the elect from one end of the sky to another (24:31)--which refers to the freedom human messengers now have to preach the gospel from horizon to horizon and bring the elect into the kingdom of God.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid, 58-59.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 59-60.

⁵¹ Ibid, 57, 60-61.

⁵² Ibid, 60.

⁵³ Ibid, 64. The careful reader will note the different interpretations the preterist gives to the various forms of οὐρανός, which occur five times in these three verses. In verse 29, it refers to the skies which contain the heavenly bodies (Gentry, 55-57; referring metaphorically to God’s judgment). In verse 30, it refers to God’s heavenly throne room to which Christ ascended (Gentry, 58). In verse 31, it refers to the earth, representing the four corners of the globe from which the elect are gathered. A futurist could fairly question the exegetical consistency of that approach.

Summary

While these passages from Matthew 24:34, 24:15-18, and 24:29-31 do not exhaust the preterist interpretation of the Olivet Discourse, they are more than sufficient to illustrate how preterists reach their conclusions. The interpretation of Matthew 24:34 demands a first-century fulfillment of everything that precedes it. Those passages that would seem to be still future in fulfillment are interpreted figuratively to apply to events in A. D. 70. Once the figurative interpretation has been established, it is supported with citations from ancient historians.

II. AN EVALUATION OF THE PRETERIST VIEW OF THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

Does History Support Preterism?

For a movement that prides itself on its historical knowledge and accuracy, preterism has historical flaws that preclude it from being a viable eschatological option. As mentioned previously, the preterist believes that Matthew 24:29-31 indicates that all the tribes of Israel will “see” the Son of Man “coming on the clouds of the sky.” The preterist says that this means the tribes of Israel would understand that Christ had come in judgment when Jerusalem was destroyed in A. D. 70.⁵⁴ The significance would be so apparent that no one could miss it--and that would presumably be even more true for believers who embraced the words of Christ.

However, an examination of early church writings contemporaneous with, and shortly after, A. D. 70, shows that the writers *of that very era* understood Jesus’ words in a futuristic sense. They do not connect those words with the preterists’ “indisputably clear” meaning that Jesus was speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem.⁵⁵ The *Didache*, for example, which probably dates in its present form from the end of the first century to no later than A. D. 150, clearly anticipated a *future* fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse. Due to its historical significance on this point, it will be quoted at length here:

For in the last days the false prophets and corrupters will abound, and the sheep will be turned into wolves, and love will be turned into hate. For as lawlessness increases, they will hate and persecute and betray one another. And then the deceiver of the world will appear as a son of God and “will perform signs and wonders,” and the earth will be delivered into his hands, and he will commit abominations the likes of which have never happened before. Then all humankind will come to the fiery test, and “many will fall away” and perish; but “those who endure” in their faith “will be saved” by the accursed one himself. And “then there will appear the signs” of the

⁵⁴ Gentry, “The Great Tribulation Is Past,” 60-61.

⁵⁵ Cf. John F. MacArthur, *The Second Coming*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 123-24; Richard Mayhue, “Jesus: A Preterist or Futurist?” 20-21.

truth: first the sign of an opening in heaven, then the sign of the sound of a trumpet, and third, the resurrection of the dead--but not of all; rather, as it has been said, "The Lord will come, and all his saints with him." Then the world "will see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven."⁵⁶

The *Didache* plainly anticipates a future fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse. The writer(s) believed that, in the future, the heavens would open, the trumpet would sound, the dead would be resurrected, and *then* the *world* would see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven. No mention is made of the destruction of Jerusalem, but rather a world-wide event that follows the resurrection of the dead. That is utterly inconceivable if, as the preterists claim, the cloud-coming of Jesus would be so obviously a judgment of Jerusalem that no one could miss it.

The dating of the *Didache* is significant for another reason as well. While in its present form (quoted above) it dates to the end of the first century to A. D. 150, it is based on materials composed at an earlier time - perhaps as early as A.D. 70.⁵⁷ The original materials, then were virtually contemporaneous with the destruction of Jerusalem, and do not see that event as the fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse. Subsequent compilers, who would have had opportunity to correct that portion of the document if they deemed it incorrect, instead retained the interpretation. That proves that those who were in the church during the apostolic age, and were contemporaries of the destruction of Jerusalem, were not preterists. If the preterist interpretation were true, the earliest church fathers missed what Jesus said

⁵⁶ *Didache* 16:3-8. In J. B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, editors and translators, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2d ed., edited and revised by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 269.

⁵⁷ Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 247.

they could not miss, and what preterists claim is “indisputably clear.” Credulity is not sufficiently elastic to embrace that contradiction.⁵⁸

Nor is this argument limited to the *Didache*. Justin Martyr (c. A. D. 140-150) wrote in his “Dialogue with Trypho” the following:

Two advents of Christ have been announced: the one, in which He is set forth as suffering, inglorious, dishonoured, and crucified; but the other, in which He shall come from heaven with glory, when the man of apostasy, who speaks strange things against the Most High, shall venture to do unlawful deeds on the earth against us the Christians...the rest of the prophecy shall be fulfilled at His second coming.⁵⁹

More than church history speaks against the historical accuracy of the preterist position. Josephus’ description of the fall of Jerusalem does not square with a careful reading of the Olivet Discourse, either. Neil Nelson lists nine reasons why it is unlikely that Matthew 24:15-28 refers to the events of A.D. 70:

1. A.D. 70 was not “great tribulation such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be” (Matthew 24:21).
2. Matthew declares that the abomination came first, followed by the great tribulation and flight. The abomination causes the desolation. In the siege of Titus, however, the tribulation preceded the abomination.
3. The abomination of desolation takes place “in the holy place,” which is probably the Jewish temple (cf. Acts 6:13; 21:28). In Daniel the abomination is always linked to the temple. When the Roman standards stood in the temple it was too late for flight into the mountains.

⁵⁸ DeMar badly misses the point when he argues that the church fathers were not inspired writers, and therefore the modern reader does not have to accept their interpretation. The issue is not whether their interpretation of Scripture is correct, but whether their understanding of their day comports with what preterists insist it must have been. If Jesus’ statement about “this generation” was so “indisputably clear” that “no one could miss it,” why did those who were in the church and most attuned to His words look for future fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse after they had witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem?

⁵⁹ Justin Martyr, “Dialogue with Trypho,” chap. 110; in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969 reprint, 253-54. For further discussion with additional examples, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 459-69.

4. If the elect are Christians who escaped to Pella, what need was there for shortening those days?
5. There is little historical evidence for false Christs appearing around the time of the Jewish war or for false Christs performing great miracles.
6. A.D. 70 did not drive masses of professing Christians to apostatize.
7. Every human being would not have been destroyed by the Jewish war (24:22) Would all Roman soldiers have been killed?
8. Matthew 24:29 states that the *parousia* (24:29-31) comes “immediately after those days (24:15-28).
9. Matthew 24:14 speaks of the absolute end. Matthew 24:15 is connected by οὐν to the preceding verses. It is natural for 24:15-28 to describe the same general period.⁶⁰

Normally, historical arguments are not decisive in choosing between interpretive options. But in this case, the preterists insist that those who lived in A. D. 70 would have understood that the destruction of Jerusalem meant that Jesus had come in judgment. Yet early church writings clearly do not reflect that understanding; indeed, those closest to the destruction of Jerusalem embraced the very futurism that the preterists reject. Those who should be the preterists’ most potent allies--those closest to A.D. 70--utterly contradict preterist doctrine. Early church writings are a telling blow against preterism.

Do Sound Hermeneutics Support Preterism?

To embark on a comprehensive discussion of the interpretation of prophecy at this juncture would be to dive--head-first--into a deep, narrow well with full knowledge of the

⁶⁰ Neil D. Nelson, Jr., “ ‘This Generation’ in Matt 24:34: A Literary Critical Perspective,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38 (September 1996) 379-80, n. 33.

impossibility of escape. The vast literature and numerous opinions on the subject stretch far beyond the scope of this paper.⁶¹

All would agree that the Olivet Discourse presents many interpretive challenges no matter the eschatological position of the interpreter. R. C. Sproul proposes three basic solutions to those problems:

1. We can interpret the entire discourse literally. In this case we must conclude that some elements of Jesus' prophecy failed to come to pass.
2. We can interpret the events surrounding the predicted parousia literally and interpret the time-frame references figuratively. This method is employed chiefly by those who do not restrict the phrase "this generation will not pass away" to the life span of Jesus' contemporaries.
3. We can interpret the time-frame references literally and the events surrounding the parousia figuratively. In this view, all of Jesus' prophecies in the Olivet Discourse were fulfilled during the period of the discourse itself and the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.⁶²

Sproul says that, when faced with the option of a literal interpretation of the time references or the description of the parousia, the preterist "chooses" the former, based on the larger hermeneutical principle of the analogy of Scripture.⁶³ In other words, the interpreter's theological framework, which he believes he has derived from a study of all the Scriptures, requires him to be literal in some places but figurative in others.

By contrast, one of the standard authors on biblical interpretation sees the situation differently. Bernard Ramm, in his extensive discussion on the interpretation of prophecy, says, "The interpreter should take the literal meaning of a prophetic passage as his limiting or

⁶¹ For a brief survey of the issues, see John F. Walvoord, "Basic Considerations in Interpreting Prophecy," in *Vital Prophetic Issues*, edited by Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1995), 14-22.

⁶² Sproul, *The Last Days*, 66.

⁶³ Ibid.

controlling guide.”⁶⁴ Without denying the presence of figures of speech or symbols, Ramm emphasizes that the literal meaning of words cannot be abandoned simply because the interpreter is handling prophetic literature.

As shown above, the effects of abandoning that method are devastating to a clear understanding of the text. It injects subjectivity without controls into the interpretive process. Gentry assigns at least three contradictory meanings to οὐρανός in his interpretation of Matthew 24:29-31.⁶⁵ He can say that it means “horizon,” “sky,” and “heavenly throne room,” only because he has abandoned the literal meaning of the term in its context to pursue a symbolic meaning that fits the need of the moment. Once that abandonment occurs, the “sky is the limit” for imaginative interpretations that have no bearing on the original intent of Jesus’ words.⁶⁶

The preterist might respond to that charge by saying he provides biblical examples for his symbolic interpretations. One can grant that without diminishing the force of the critique. The importation of verses from other scriptural contexts does not alter the significance of this preteristic interpretive error. D. A. Carson refers to this practice as the unwarranted “juxtaposition of texts,” and asks:

What gives interpreters the right to link certain verses together, and not others? The point is that all such linking eventually produces a grid that affects the interpretation of other texts. There may be fallacies connected not only with the way individual verses are interpreted, but also with the way several passages are linked--and then also with the way such a link affects the interpretation of the next verse that is studied!⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3d rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 253-54.

⁶⁵ See footnote 54 for details.

⁶⁶ Pun intended.

⁶⁷ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 139.

The careful student, once sensitive to this issue, will immediately see how this “exegetical fallacy” characterizes virtually every page of preterist writings. The quoting of verses simply to demonstrate a vague verbal parallel by itself does not establish the proper interpretation of any passages, and further does not constitute “letting Scripture interpret Scripture.” Such loose cross-referencing only reflects the interpreter’s bias.

Similarly, preterists err in their interpretation of the Olivet Discourse when they allow Matthew 24:34 to dominate their interpretation of other verses in the passage. The persuasiveness of the preterist interpretation of the Olivet Discourse depends on the interpreter’s ability to establish that Matthew 24:34 demands a first century fulfillment. The preterist must establish that premise before he even begins his verse-by-verse exposition of Matthew 24.⁶⁸

For example, Gentry insists that Matthew 24:21-22, which predicts a great tribulation that will surpass all other tribulations for all of time, must refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70. Why? Gentry leaps over twelve verses to discuss “this generation” in 24:34. Since “this generation” is “obviously” a literal time reference, then Matthew 24:21-22 must be interpreted symbolically to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem. That interpretation, Gentry admits, would not be allowed if Matthew 24:21-22 were interpreted literally. Thus, by fiat of the interpreter, Matthew 24:34 determines the meaning of 24:21-22.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Gentry establishes his interpretation of Matthew 24:34 on pages 26-32 of “The Great Tribulation is Past;” his exposition of Matthew 24 begins on page 33. Sproul discusses the time frame references on pages 15-17 of *The Last Days According to Jesus*; his exposition of the Olivet Discourse begins on page 29. Gary DeMar first gives his interpretation of Matthew 24:34 on page 3 of *Last Days Madness* (then quotes the verse 33 times thereafter).

⁶⁹ See Gentry, 51.

A similar hermeneutical error occurs in Gentry's interpretation of Matthew 24:29, which predicts cosmic disturbances on a grand scale before the coming of Christ. Can the reader take that verse literally to refer to disturbances in the heavenly bodies? Gentry says no. Such cosmic disturbances are too catastrophic to fit into what we know about A.D. 70, and that would not fit with a "literal" interpretation of Matthew 24:34.⁷⁰ Gentry then proceeds to assert that the cosmic disturbances are not really cosmic disturbances, but merely apocalyptic language to express national calamity or disturbance. He juxtaposes Isaiah 40:26 in support of his position. Verse 34 simply requires 24:29 to be interpreted differently than a plain reading would allow.⁷¹ In yet another passage, he speaks of Matthew 24:34 "controlling" Matthew 24:30.⁷²

Through these examples, the reader should see that a preterist filters the entire Olivet Discourse through the grid of his understanding of 24:34. That verse is his interpretive starting point. The preterist cannot interpret the rest of the Olivet Discourse *in the same way* he interprets 24:34 because otherwise he will end up with passages that do not support the A. D. 70 date. This is a serious interpretive error, which, if followed throughout Scripture, would irretrievably obscure its perspicuity.

The preferred hermeneutical approach is to allow each verse equal weight in the interpretive process. Since all Scripture is equally inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16-17), each verse should be allowed to speak on its own without being "controlled" by another verse chosen by the interpreter. Only then can the full measure of God's revelation be brought to bear on the interpretive task.

⁷⁰ Gentry, 55.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Gentry, "Conclusion," 195.

An approach that allows one verse to dominate all others--to the point of contradicting the clear sense of the subjugated verse--simply reflects the interpreter's bias, and can only be described as arbitrary and theologically self-serving. Such is the case with preterism's elevation of Matthew 24:34 in the Olivet Discourse.⁷³

Robert Thomas insightfully writes: "Preterism follows a mixture of hermeneutical principles--sometimes literal, sometimes symbolic... That type of interpretive vacillation is the only way one can arrive at a preterist view."⁷⁴ Any hermeneutical consistency--whether consistently literal or consistently symbolic--would desolate the preterist system. Consequently, sound hermeneutics preclude preterism as a valid option for the interpretation of the Olivet Discourse.

Does Sound Exegesis Support Preterism?

Having addressed the historical and hermeneutical problems inherent in preterism, attention must now turn to an exegetical evaluation of its assertions. Once again, only selected passages can be addressed due to space constraints. But the following discussion will be sufficient to prove that preterism cannot withstand exegetical scrutiny.

Matthew 24:34

If a reader only consulted preterist writings, he would have no idea that established scholars from many persuasions do not consider the phrase "this generation" to be

⁷³ In this regard, preterists follow a hermeneutical principle similar to evangelical feminists, who use Galatians 3:28 to control the interpretation of all other passages related to women in church leadership. Both preterists and evangelical feminists fail to let each text have equal weight in developing a biblical theology for their respective fields of interest. Cf. Paul Felix, "The Hermeneutics of Evangelical Feminism," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 5 (Fall 1994) 159-84.

⁷⁴ Robert Thomas, "A Classical Dispensationalist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 213.

“indisputably clear.” To the contrary, one commentator wrote that it is “the most difficult phrase to interpret in this complicated eschatological discourse.”⁷⁵

The difficulty in interpretation is reflected in the fact that no fewer than eight interpretations of “this generation” have been offered throughout church history. Richard Mayhue surveys eight views that have been held at different times (see his article for supporting citations):

1. Christ was mistaken. This is the majority liberal view.
2. Christ was speaking of the human race in general. This was the secondary view of Jerome regarding Matthew 24:34.
3. Christ was speaking of A.D. 70 alone. This is or has been held by Bruce, Wenham, Beasley-Murray, Plummer, Hagner, Gentry, Carson, Wessel, Sproul, Russell, and DeMar.
4. Christ was implying a preterist/futurist double fulfillment (Carson, Turner).
5. Christ was speaking of faithful Christians in general (Chrysostom).
6. Christ was referring to the Jewish race (futurist view). This was Jerome’s primary view, as well as Archer’s, Dunham’s, Hendriksen’s, and Liefeld’s.
7. Christ was referring to an eschatological generation (futurist view). This is the normal, but not unanimous, view held by dispensationalists like Walvoord, Blomberg, Liefeld (possibility), Hiebert, Bock, and MacArthur. Archer acknowledges it.
8. Christ was referring to an evil generation (futurist view). This view is held by Alford (historic premillennialist), LaRondelle, Nelson, Thomas, Lenski (amillennialist), Morganthaler, and Lovenstam.⁷⁶

A full-scale solution of this interpretive problem is beyond the scope of this paper.

However, the briefest acquaintance with the many views--most of which are held by several interpreters--should dispel preterism’s brash assertion that the phrase is “indisputably clear.”

⁷⁵ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)*, in *The Anchor Bible Commentaries*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1353.

⁷⁶ Mayhue, “Jesus: A Preterist or Futurist?”, 16-21.

Preterists have damaged their credibility by making such statements without a meaningful interaction with opposing views.

Neil Nelson has persuasively argued that “generation” refers to an evil kind of people in Matthew’s gospel. Nelson acknowledges Jesus’ contemporaries are usually in view in Matthew’s use of “this generation,” but he points out that the references can be more than chronological--they are often *ethical*. Jesus was speaking about *evil, faithless* people when he used the term “generation.” That can clearly be seen in passages like 11:16-19; 12:39-41, 45; 16:4, and 17:17.⁷⁷ Mayhue adds that γενεά (“generation”) refers to “the category of rebellious people who have rejected God’s truth and righteousness through the ages.”⁷⁸

Not only have preterists failed to acknowledge the ethical dimension to Matthew’s use of “generation,” but they have also failed to recognize that he uses “this generation” in a way that extends beyond the immediate contemporaries of Jesus. The individuals addressed by “this generation” in Matthew 23:34-36 did not kill Abel nor Zechariah, yet Jesus attributes the murder to them. Nelson writes:

The contemporaries of Christ did not murder Zechariah son of Berechiah (23:35-36), and thus “this generation” in 23:36 extends beyond Jesus’ contemporaries to include murderers back to the time of Abel and forward to those who would kill and crucify and persecute disciples until Jesus returns.⁷⁹

When those factors are combined with the overall futuristic context of the Olivet Discourse, including the Son of Man coming in His glory (24:30; 25:31), sitting on His glorious throne (25:31); and all nations being gathered before Him (25:32), the interpreter has ample reason to understand “this generation” in Matthew 24:34 as referring to the evil generation that will be alive when “all these things take place”--in the future.

⁷⁷ Nelson, “This Generation,” 381, n. 37.

⁷⁸ Mayhue, “Jesus: A Preterist or Futurist?,” 19.

Matthew 23:39

Preterists determinedly avoid any significant discussion of Matthew 23:39, where Jesus says to the Jews, “For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’” This verse creates an unsolvable dilemma for preterists in light of their interpretation of Matthew 24:30. As shown above, preterists maintain that Matthew 24:30 does not refer to physical sight, but to the Jews’ mental understanding that the Lord was judging them for their rejection of Him.

That interpretation cannot possibly be reconciled with 23:39, which says that Israel would not see Jesus again until they joyfully received Him as Messiah. Since the Jews did not receive Jesus as Messiah in A. D. 70, they could not have seen Him then--whether with their physical sight or their mental understanding. Consequently, Matthew 24:30 must still be future--another fatal blow to preterism.⁸⁰

Preterists are aware of this dilemma, but they arguably are not forthright in dealing with it in their writings. Gentry devotes nearly two full pages to the significance of Matthew 23:37-38, and then discusses Jesus’ departure from the temple in 24:1. He does not even give a verse reference for 23:39 anywhere in his main text.⁸¹ An uninformed reader would not even know Matthew 23:39 existed. Gentry’s omission of this verse is palpable, because it critically damages his entire thesis that Christ returned in A.D. 70.

⁷⁹ Nelson, “This Generation,” 381, n. 37.

⁸⁰ Stanley D. Toussaint, “A Critique of the Preterist View of the Olivet Discourse,” unpublished paper presented to the Pre-Trib Study Group, (Dallas: 1996), 4. Cf. Thomas, “A Classical Dispensationalist View of Revelation,” 228: “[The Jewish nation] did not at that time say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,’ so they obviously did not see Jesus at that time. The fulfillment of that prophecy is yet future.”

⁸¹ Gentry, 23-24. He follows the same pattern elsewhere in the book at pages 172 and 182.

Gentry only mentions the verse in an obscure footnote that is connected to 1 Kings 9:6-9 in the main text. Gentry claims that the phrase, “until you say” suggests an indefinite possibility that may not happen. In other words, the Jews would not see Him again, for they do not so proclaim Him.⁸² As shown above, that assertion directly contradicts his interpretation of Matthew 24:30 when he emphatically states that the Jews *did* see Jesus when He came against them in judgment. Eventually, the reader is forced to conclude that the preterists cannot have it both ways.

But not only that, Gentry’s assertion that “until you say” refers to an indefinite possibility is demonstrably false from the Greek text, which reads “λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν, οὐ μὴ με ἴδητε ἀπ’ ἄρτι ἕως ἄν εἴπητε, Εὐλογημένος ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἐν ὀνόματι κυρίου.” (For I say to you, you shall by no means see me from now until you say, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.”) The operative phrase is ἕως ἄν εἴπητε “until you say.”

Contrary to Gentry and his supporting sources, the use of the particle ἄν with the subjunctive in a temporal clause (here, εἴπητε) does not refer to an indefinite possibility. Instead, it describes an event “which can and will occur, but whose occurrence cannot yet be assumed with certainty.”⁸³ A. T. Robertson, speaking of the use of ἕως ἄν with the subjunctive, states: “The note of expectancy suits the subjunctive.”⁸⁴ Ernest DeWitt Burton

⁸² Gentry, 208, n. 46. DeMar joins Gentry in this assertion. *Last Days Madness*, 77. Their assertion is not based on independent exegesis, but rather in reliance on R. T. France, *Matthew*, in Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 332.

⁸³ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 48.

⁸⁴ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 976.

writes, “The *beginning* or *simple occurrence* of the action of the verb introduced by ἕως is the limit of the action denoted by the principal verb.”⁸⁵

Applying that grammatical principle to Matthew 23:39, Israel’s inability to see Christ will cease when she receives Him as her Messiah. That event is still future, but certain to happen--not only because of the grammar, but because of the rich Old Testament promises God made to His people (cf. Zechariah 12:10).

That conclusion is further supported by examining other New Testament uses of ἕως ἄν with the aorist subjunctive. In the following verses, it is clear that the future contingency is expected to be fulfilled. (Indeed, to view some of the verses any other way would border on heresy.):

Matthew 2:13: “Arise and take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and stay there *until I tell* you ...”

Matthew 5:18: “For truly I say to you, *until heaven and earth pass away*, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, *until all is accomplished*.”⁸⁶

Matthew 10:11: “And into whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it; and abide there *until you go away*.”

Matthew 12:20: “A battered reed he will not break off, and a smoldering wick he will not put out, *until He leads* justice to victory.”

Matthew 16:28: “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death *until they see* the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.”⁸⁷

Matthew 22:44: “The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, *until I put* Thine enemies beneath Thy feet.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982 reprint).

⁸⁶ This verse is particularly important to theonomic postmillennialists. One wonders if they would consider interpreting it as an “indefinite possibility.”

⁸⁷ Note the identical construction in the parallel passages Mark 9:1 and Luke 9:27 .

⁸⁸ Note the identical construction in the parallel passages Mark 12:36, Luke 20:43, Acts 2:35, and Hebrews 1:13.

Matthew 24:34: “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away *until all these things take place.*”

Mark 6:10: “And He said to them, ‘Wherever you enter a house, stay there *until you leave town.*’”

1 Corinthians 4:5: “Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait *until the Lord comes.*”

The foregoing verses conclusively establish that the New Testament use of ἕως ἄν does not refer to an “indefinite possibility.” It refers to a future event that will occur even if the time of fulfillment is uncertain. To take it as an “indefinite possibility,” as preterists suggest, is to cast doubt on such central themes as Christ’s fulfillment of the Law (Matthew 5:18), His triumph over His enemies (Matthew 22:44), and His return to earth (1 Corinthians 4:5). To follow the preterists’ suggestion on Matthew 23:39 would even undermine their key text of Matthew 24:34: “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away *until all these things take place.*” Is this a dogmatic certainty, as the preterists state in their exposition of the text, or is it an “indefinite possibility” based on the same grammar found in Matthew 23:39? Again, the preterist cannot have it both ways. Sound exegesis precludes preterism as a valid option for the interpretation of the Olivet Discourse.

Other Exegetical Considerations

Other exegetical considerations make the preterist interpretation unsatisfying as well. An extended discussion of these points is beyond the scope of the paper, yet they should be mentioned to identify additional areas for further study.

First, the preterists do not satisfactorily deal with the concept of the “coming” of Christ in the Olivet Discourse. The Olivet Discourse refers to the coming of the Lord nine times (24:3, 27, 30, 37, 39, 42, 43, 44, 48). Gentry considers 24:27 and 24:30 to have been

fulfilled in A. D. 70.⁸⁹ Yet he views all the references after Matthew 24:36 to be references to the still-future Second Advent.⁹⁰ The exegetical base for this distinction (the difference between “this” in Matthew 24:34 and “that” in Matthew 24:36) is flimsy at best. It makes better sense to understand coming consistently throughout the discourse.

Second, preterists fail to give adequate consideration to Matthew 24:36: “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.” Jesus disclaimed knowledge of the timing of future events, and even went further to say that *no one* knows. Putting aside the preterists’ false distinction between the “cloud-coming” in 24:30 and the other “coming” passages in the Discourse, it seems obvious that the *last* thing Jesus was giving His disciples in the Olivet Discourse was a method to pinpoint the time of His return. Anthony Hoekema comments:

If these words mean anything at all, they mean that Christ himself did not know the day or the hour of his return...If, then, Christ himself, according to his own admission, did not know the hour of his return, no other statements of his can be interpreted as indicating the exact time of that return...The insistence that these passages require a Parousia within the generation of those who were contemporaries of Jesus is clearly at variance with Jesus’ own disavowal of the knowledge of the time of his return.⁹¹

Hoekema’s counsel is sound. One could add that Jesus’ admonition that “no one knows” the day and hour of His return comes *immediately* on the heels of his statement in Matthew 24:34. The preterists must violently violate context to say that 24:36 has no bearing on 24:34. In that regard, it is most convenient that Gentry’s exposition stops at 24:35.⁹²

⁸⁹ Gentry, “The Great Tribulation Is Past,” 53, 57-59.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 26.

⁹¹ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991 reprint ed.), 113.

⁹² Gentry asserts that the difference between “*this*” generation in 24:34 and “*that*” day and hour in 24:36 shows that Jesus was distinguishing between what would be fulfilled in

Preterists' confident assertions about the A. D. 70 date are contrary to the Lord's own words that no one would know the time of His return. That was true in A. D. 30; it remains true in A. D. 2000. These additional exegetical considerations also preclude preterism as a valid option for the interpretation of the Olivet Discourse.

Some Theological Reflections on Preterism

The Apologetic Concerns of Preterists

In assessing preterism, it is helpful to realize that apologetic concerns are often at the front of their thinking. Preterists are intensely critical of the writings of futurists in past years who used then-current events to speculate on possible dates for the return of Christ to earth. Gary DeMar introduces his book with criticism of writers like Hal Lindsey, Lester Sumrall, Grant Jeffrey, and others who have predicted (with varying degrees of qualification) the date of the return of Christ. As the predicted dates come and go without incident, Christian writers increasingly appear like the little boy who cried "wolf" too many times, with the result that the cause of Christ is harmed before a watching world.⁹³ Kenneth Gentry has similarly chafed at several prophecy books with titles like *Planet Earth--2000: Will Mankind Survive?; Earth's Final Days; Prophecy 2000: Rushing to Armageddon; and Is This the Last Century?*⁹⁴

In addition to the apologetic embarrassment caused by modern-day date-setters, preterists are concerned about the perceived apologetic threat of unfulfilled prophecy. If

A. D. 70 (i.e., Matthew 24:4-33) and what would be fulfilled in the more distant future (Matthew 24:36-25:46). His argument is unpersuasive. If Jesus was making such a sharp (and critical) disjunction at that point in the discourse, one would expect to find the strong adversative *ἀλλά* introducing the contrast instead of *δέ*.

⁹³ DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 1-21.

⁹⁴ Gentry, "The Great Tribulation Is Past," 11.

Matthew 24:34 predicts a first-century fulfillment of Jesus' words, and yet many of Jesus' sayings in the Olivet Discourse remain unfulfilled, the door is open for critics to assert that He was mistaken about the timing of His return. And if Jesus was mistaken, the Bible loses its authority, and the gospel is hindered. DeMar writes:

Critics of the Bible have studied Jesus' words in these passages and have concluded that he was wrong! Jesus predicted that He would return within a generation, as Matthew 24:34 clearly states, and He did not. The conclusion? The Bible cannot be trusted as a reliable book. It is filled with errors.⁹⁵

R. C. Sproul speaks of a professor's attacks on Scripture during his college days:

What stands out in my memory of those days is the heavy emphasis on biblical texts regarding the return of Christ, which were constantly cited as examples of errors in the New Testament and proof that the text had been edited to accommodate the crisis in the early church caused by the so-called parousia-delay of Jesus. In a word, much of the criticism leveled against the trustworthiness of Scripture was linked to questions regarding biblical eschatology...Due to the crisis in confidence in the truth and authority of Scripture and the subsequent crisis regarding the real historical Jesus, eschatology must come to grips with the tensions of time-frame references in the New Testament.⁹⁶

Many preterists, then, consider more to be at stake in the Olivet Discourse than an in-house eschatological debate with futurists. If the time texts call for a first-century fulfillment that did not occur, Christianity is seriously hobbled before its foes. Preterists believe that they rescue apologetics from this danger because their eschatology accepts the "plain" meaning of the time texts and shows how they were fulfilled. To the preterist, the futurist position evades the plain meaning of the texts and thus comprises an effective defense of the faith.

How shall these concerns be addressed? Surely, a thoughtful futurist can agree that the failed date-settings of popular futurist writers are an unfortunate embarrassment to the

⁹⁵ Ibid, 37.

⁹⁶ Sproul, *The Last Days*, 14-15, 26.

cause of Christ. Perhaps biblical futurists need to speak out more forcefully against date-setting, knowing that it is contrary to Christ's admonitions that no one can know the date of His return. However, futurism cannot be abandoned simply because some of its proponents have abused it.⁹⁷ Eschatology cannot be driven by perceived apologetic advantage. Like all other areas of theology, it must be driven by accurate biblical exegesis--something that preterism is sorely lacking.

Ultimately, the attacks of liberal critics will concern evidentialist apologists like Sproul more than the presuppositional apologist. The church does not need a new eschatological system simply because unbelievers question the return of Christ. The humble child of God should meet such skeptics with 2 Peter 3:3-7, which promises judgment against those mockers who say, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation."

The student who notes these twin preterist concerns--the failure of past futurist writers and the attacks of liberal critics--will be able to account for them as he interacts with preterist writings. He will also be positioned to address the concerns of believers who have come under the influence of preterist teaching.

In that regard, the student of Scripture should take seriously the appeal of preterism to the average man in the pew. By portraying the past sensationalism of some futurist writers, the preterist is able to cast all futurists in a negative light. That opens the door for him to introduce a seemingly more sane approach to biblical prophecy. The preterist's affirmation of the inerrancy of Scripture gains him an even more sympathetic hearing with the earnest, but unprepared, believer. The plausibility of preterism is then heightened even further when

⁹⁷ Otherwise, partial preterists would have to abandon their cause immediately in the

it quotes ancient historians that are new to the reader. In contrast to the sensationalistic futurists, the preterist appears as a sober student of Scripture who has done his homework. It would be a mistake to underestimate the appeal and effectiveness of that approach.

Preterism, Covenant Theology, and the Future of Israel

The student should also recognize the almost inevitable ties between preterism and covenant theology. Kenneth Gentry, who states his covenantal perspective openly, writes that the first-century tribulation closed out “the Jewish-based, old covenant order and establishes the new covenant as the conclusive redemptive-historical reality.”⁹⁸ Preterism is tailor-made for covenant theology because it dispenses with Israel as a nation and many prophetic passages that would otherwise prove embarrassing.

Consequently, the student who addresses preterism in-depth must be prepared to deal with the broader issues that will almost certainly come along with it. The future of Israel, and her distinction from the church, will be quickly invoked as the preterist asserts a final judgment against Israel in the first century. The student should be prepared to address these more fundamental issues when he encounters preterism.⁹⁹

Those theological themes lead naturally into another preterist weakness. The perspective of the disciples who heard the Olivet Discourse had been shaped by the Old Testament promises to the nation of Israel. If Jesus was predicting the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the nation of Israel with “indisputable clarity,” He can only be regarded as a colossal failure, because the disciples were still expecting the national

face of the heretical teaching of hyper-preterism.

⁹⁸ Gentry, “The Great Tribulation Is Past,” 12.

⁹⁹ For the distinction between Israel and the Church, see Robert Saucy, *The Church in God’s Program*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 69-82. For the contrast between covenant

restoration of Israel at the time of the Ascension. Their words, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom of Israel?” (Acts 1:6) indicate that the Olivet Discourse had not crushed their hopes of national restoration. They were still expecting a future kingdom for ethnic Israel.¹⁰⁰ That is inconceivable from the preterist perspective, and illustrates how the broader themes of covenant theology and the distinction between Israel and the church intersect with the issues of preterism.

Preterism and Millennial Views

As a concluding thought, the present writer would encourage future study on the relationship between preterism and the different millennial views. Some of the most vocal proponents of preterism are theonomic postmillennialists. It would seem that postmillennialism would drive the need for preterism, rather than vice-versa, because postmillennialism ultimately requires increasing righteousness to usher in the return of Christ. A future tribulation as described by dispensationalism is not consistent with those expectations. Consequently, postmillennialists would seem to have much to gain from the preterist viewpoint, which puts the tribulation in the past and leaves it there.

Similarly, amillennialists might be more prone to embrace preterism, though for different reasons. Amillennialism would benefit from the preterist’s judgment on Israel (which would open the door for the transfer of Israel’s blessings to the church), and the

and dispensational theology, see Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is a Difference!*, (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990).

¹⁰⁰ John A. McLean, “Did Jesus Correct the Disciples’ View of the Kingdom?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (April-June 1994), 227. In other words, if Jesus taught that Israel would be judged into extinction within the generation of the disciples, they completely missed the point. They did not expect an imminent *destruction* of the nation, they expected an imminent *restoration* of it. It is difficult if not impossible to reconcile that expectation with Jesus’ introductory admonition in the Olivet Discourse that the disciples guard themselves against being misled about the future (Matthew 24:4).

relegation to the past of prophetic events. All these matters could be explored profitably in future study.

CONCLUSION

Despite the alluring features of preterism, it is clearly in error. However, the patient student of Scripture will find himself more than prepared to refute the doctrine of those who contradict. When one sifts through preterist teaching, he finds that history does not support preterism. Sound hermeneutics do not support preterism. Sound exegesis does not support preterism. And sound theology does not support preterism.

It is probably the better part of wisdom not to expect preterism to go away any time soon. Its proponents, especially Kenneth Gentry, are clever writers who make a persuasive case. Yet truth does not reside in preterism, and its proponents will one day give an account for leading unsuspecting believers astray. In the meantime, Robert Thomas has set forth the response to preterism that will prove most effective over the long haul:

Meeting its challenge will call for patient exegesis of the separate texts, the kind that requires much time. Yet it is vital to spend this time in the text if the truth of the Word of God is to prevail over propagated error. May this be a call to all to handle the Scriptures carefully in the face of this and many other threats that tend to disfigure the face of Christian doctrine here at the end of the twentieth century. Though human efforts are feeble, may God help His servants to do a good job in what He has put them here to do.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Thomas, "Theonomy and the Dating of Revelation," 202.

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