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Why I am a Preterist

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In this article, the first in a series of *Why I am a Preterist*, we survey 37 New Testament time texts, which unanimously place Jesus' return in the first century.

Eschatology: The Study of "Last Things"

The study of the "latter days" and the "time of the end" is referred to as "eschatology," the study of "last things" (Greek "eschatos" = last + "ology" = study of). There are four schools of eschatological interpretation: 1) Futurism; 2) Continuous Historical; 3) Idealism; and 4) Preterism. Futurism teaches that the end times and second coming of Christ are still future. Futurists typically believe that Christ's second coming will be *bodily and visible*, and will mark the *end of the world*. However, many Futurists believe that the second

coming will issue in a *millennial reign* of Christ *on earth* seated on David's throne in Israel.

The Continuous Historical school is type of Futurism, which has it that the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation provide a *continuous survey of history* until the world's end. This school was popular with the Reformers who saw the Catholic Church and papacy in the imagery of Daniel and Revelation, and thought they were thus living in the time of the end. This school has been discredited over time, as men have come to recognize that the papacy is nowhere alluded to in scripture. No serious scholars embrace it today.

Idealism sees events described in prophecy as neither past, present, nor future, but representative of larger ideals and principles. Eschatological prophecy deals with the ongoing struggle between the forces of light

and darkness, and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Its message is purely a spiritual one, an allegory of the spiritual path, which is equally relevant in all ages and for all people. Augustine's allegorical interpretation of Revelation in his *City of God* may thus be defined as a type of Idealism, being anchored to no particular events in history, but standing as an allegory of God's spiritual kingdom versus that of the world. Against this view it may be pointed out that Revelation is definitely tied to specific events in history; the book opens and closes with affirmations that the events described were "at hand" (Rev. 1:1, 3; 22:6, 7, 12, 22). Obviously, this same objection is equally applicable to Futurism.

The word Preterism is from the Latin "*prae*" (before) and "*ire*" (to go), whose past participle is "*praeteritus*," meaning the subject *has gone past*. The word occurs in the future tense in the Latin Vulgate at Matt. 24:34 thus: "*non praeteribit haec generatio donec omnia haec fiant*" ("this generation shall not pass until all these things be fulfilled"). Preterism takes a *contemporary-historical* view of eschatology, holding that Revelation and related prophecies describe events contemporary to those to whom they were addressed. Specifically, Preterism views the latter days and second coming as being bound up in the world events marked by the persecution of Nero Caesar (AD 64-68), the Roman civil wars that erupted upon Nero's death ("the year of four emperors") (AD 68-70), and the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome (AD 67-70).

It is this writer's belief that Preterism is far and away the most Biblically defensible view. Virtually all prophetic announcements, Old Testament and New, concerning the coming of Christ and his kingdom, the latter days, and related events are tied to a *specific time* in history that is now millennia past. It is a well recognized fact that the kingdom and coming of Christ would occur in the days of the Roman Empire, the Jerusalem temple, and "Elijah the Prophet" (John the Baptist - Matt. 17:12, 13; Mal. 4:5, 6) Futurists, particularly Dispensationalists, thus find it necessary to speak about a "revived Roman Empire" and "third temple" and another "Elijah."¹ Rome's historical connection with the kingdom and coming of Christ likewise figured in the Continuous Historical school's belief that the papacy was the antichrist, based upon the assumption that the Catholic Church was a continuation of the Roman Empire.

¹ John Walvood, *The Book of Revelation* (Mood Press, 1966), pp. 176 (a future temple); 178-180 (Elijah still to come); 197, 204 (revived Roman Empire).

Futurists are compelled to look for revival of these historical characters this way due to preconceived notions about the *nature* of prophecy's fulfillment. Dispensationalists look for a worldly kingdom with Christ seated upon a political throne in earthly Jerusalem. Since this did not occur during the historical era of Rome, "Elijah" and the Jerusalem temple, they are forced to bring these characters upon the world stage a *second time* so prophecy can be fulfilled in the way they believe it must. Futurists who look for the sudden conflagration of the cosmos at Christ's coming are forced for obvious reasons to similarly ignore the historical anchorage of prophetic announcements. Again, the expected *nature* of fulfillment determines their outcome.

But if the nature of fulfillment is the only justification for ignoring the historical context of prophecy, are not Futurists building upon a weak foundation? This is particularly true given the *symbolic nature* of prophecy, whose metaphoric and mystical language makes the nature of fulfillment its least certain and predictable facet. Surely the safer course is to bring our understanding of the nature of prophetic fulfillment into line with objective criteria of historical context, and not *vice versa*. The time texts and characters/events should guide our interpretation of the symbolism, and not the symbolism overrule the time and characters. This three story pyramid of interpretation - time texts, characters/events, and symbolism - is the method of Preterist interpretation, which we will investigate in this series of articles. We will confine the rest of this article to the time texts, the base of the pyramid, reserving for future articles the characters/events and symbolic nature of prophetic language.

The Time Texts: A Matter of Biblical Credibility

The most compelling evidence in favor of the Preterist interpretation is the *time texts*, which universally attest that Christ's second coming would occur in the lives of the apostles and first generation of believers. They serve as the foundation upon which all other interpretation is built. Here follow some of the more compelling texts, with our comments following.

Testimony of Matthew

- *Matt. 10:23 - "But when they persecute you in one city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come."*

This was spoken to the disciples who first carried the gospel message. Jesus indicates his soon return, saying they would not have time to preach in every city of

Israel before he had come. This not only places Jesus' return in the disciples' lifetimes, it also links it to the Jewish war with Rome and the fall of Jerusalem, as subsequent passages make clear.

- *Matt. 16:27, 28 - "For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works. Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom."*

Here we have an express statement, placing Christ's coming within the lives of his audience. Mark's gospel words this a little differently, saying, the kingdom would come "with power" (Mk. 8:38; 9:1). In other words, it would come *in force*, overwhelming all that stood in its way. Christ would then sit upon the throne of his glory, judging men and nations (Matt. 25:31-46), which judgment continues today.

- *Matt. 21:40-45 - "When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons. Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder. And when the Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them."*

Although this parable does not give an express statement of time, in saying the Pharisees understood it of them, together with its prediction that Christ would come against the Jewish nation and its leaders, places its fulfillment by the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

- *Matt. 23:36-39 - "Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not? Behold your house is left unto you desolate."*

For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed in he that cometh in the name of the Lord."

This passage should be linked with those that went before. In Matt. 23:34, Jesus mentions how the Jews would persecute his prophets and wise men "from city to city" just like Matt. 10:23. He then says that all the righteous blood shed upon the earth would be required of that generation, and would be fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem. Directly or indirectly, the blood of all earth's martyrs had all been spent on behalf of the gospel and the cause of righteousness. Since the gospel was the culmination of God's purpose, the Jews' rejection of the gospel meant that all the blood down through the ages spilled in its behalf would be required of them. The desolations would be so great, even the Jews would acknowledge Christ's divine visitation upon the nation.

- *Matt. 24:30, 34 - "And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory... Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled."*

This passage repeats the prediction of Christ's coming within the very generation of those then living. The context is expressly tied to the fall of Jerusalem (Matt. 24:1-3), being a continuation of the things predicted in Matt. 23:34-39.

- *Matt. 26:64 - Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven."*

The pronoun "ye" is directed to Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, who would witness Christ's divine visitation and judgment in the fall of Jerusalem not forty years hence. "Coming in the clouds of heaven" is a metaphoric phrase common to the Old Testament prophets, signifying God's providential judgment upon a people or nation (Isa. 19:1; Ps. 18:10; Ezek. 1:4), and answers the kingdom coming in power. It also has specific reference to Daniel's vision of the heavenly coronation of Christ (Dan. 7:13, 14), which was repeated by Stephen at his trial for saying Christ would destroy Jerusalem and the temple (Acts 6:13, 14; 7:56)

Thus, in Matthew alone there are six direct statements placing Jesus' return within the lives of the first disciples. Whatever presuppositions we may have about Christ's second coming, the time texts are clear and unequivocal and must guide our understanding.

We cannot avoid their force without doing violence to their language. Further, the context of these passages ties them to *characters* and *events* within the generation of the apostles. Christ's coming in his kingdom in power entailed judgment upon the Jewish nation for rejection of his gospel and the persecution of his church. Since we know that Jerusalem did in fact fall in AD 70, there is every reason to uphold the word of God and affirm Christ's return within the lives of the first disciples.

Testimony of John

The synoptic gospels of Mark and Luke contain identical statements to Matthew, so we pass over them here and look instead at John:

- *Jn. 21:22 - "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me."*

In Matt. 16:28, Jesus stated some of the disciples would live until he returned. Here, Jesus specifies that, although Peter would give his life in martyrdom (v. 18), the apostle John would live until he had come again. History confirms that John lived in Ephesus until the time of Trajan.

Testimony of Acts

- *Acts 6:13, 14 - "This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: for we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered us."*

Although this passage is not a time text proper, because of its connection to the statements in Matthew tying Jesus' return to the destruction of Jerusalem, we have included it here. Stephen was tried before the Sanhedrin on an accusation that he had blasphemed the temple by saying it would be destroyed. Given that Stephen says Jesus would destroy the city and temple, it is clear that Christ's coming would be *spiritual and providential*, not physical and personal; it would take the form of divine visitation and judgment executed in world events, guided by heaven's hand. In the course of his trial, Stephen defended the charge that he had blasphemed Moses and the temple by pointing out that God himself had destroyed the temple before at the Babylonian captivity (Acts 7:42, 43). He then quotes the prophet Isaiah:

"Howbeit, the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet, Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me?"

Saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest? Hath not my hand made all these things?" Acts 7:48-50

Stephen's purpose in quoting this passage is to show that the temple was only qualifiedly holy; it was not the actual place of God's habitation, but merely a symbol. The Jews' devotion to the temple, but murder of Christ, showed that they were adhering to outward forms of religion, while rejecting God who was its very object. Stephen quoted only the beginning of Isaiah's warning. In the rest of the passage, Isaiah goes on to describe the Jews' persecution of Christians and the coming destruction of the city and temple. First he describes the continuing temple service as an abomination equal to murder and idolatry:

"He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man; he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a dog's neck; he that offereth an oblation, as if he offered swine's blood; he that burneth incense, as if he blessed an idol. Yea, they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations. I also will choose their delusions, and will bring their fears upon them; because when I called, none did answer; when I spake, they did not hear: but they did evil before mine eyes, and shoes that in which I delighted not. Isa. 66:3, 4

Next, Isaiah addresses Christians who were being "cast out" (excommunicated) by their fellow Jews for Jesus' name sake. Even before Jesus was crucified, the rulers of the Jews had decreed that anyone who confessed Christ was to be cast out (Jn. 9:22, 34; 12:42). The "appearing" of the Lord refers to his second coming.

Hear the word of the Lord, ye that tremble at his word; Your breath that hated you, that cast you out for my name's sake, said, Let the Lord be glorified: but he shall appear to your joy, and they shall be ashamed. Isa. 66:5

Finally, we see the Lord's wrath upon the Jews as he came in providential judgment upon the nation.

A voice of noise from the city, a voice from the temple, a voice of the Lord that rendereth recompense to his enemies...for behold the Lord will come with fire, and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire." Isa. 66:3-6, 15

Although Stephen did not quote the passage in full, the Sanhedrin could not fail to see the connection: The destruction of the city and temple Stephen was

foretelling was nothing more than that foretold by the prophet Isaiah. This should have provided a full defense to the charge he had blasphemed. Instead, the Jews hardened their hearts and stopped their ears, and condemned Stephen to death. For us, Stephen's statements, coupled with the prophecy of Isaiah and statements of Christ, provide time texts for the coming of the Lord and related events.

Testimony of Romans

- *Rom. 13:11, 12 - "And that, knowing the time, that now is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand."*
- *Rom. 16:20 - And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly.*

The persecution of the church that began in Judea did not remain there, but was carried by the Jews throughout Asia Minor and the world. The book of Acts relates how everywhere Paul carried the gospel he met with resistance and persecution from the Jews. The historian Suetonius relates that the emperor Claudius was even forced to banish all Jews from Rome and Italy because of their riots against "Chrestus."² This is corroborated by Luke in Acts 18:2, where Paul met Aquilla and Priscilla, who had lately come from Italy "because Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome." With the death of Claudius, Nero came to the throne and the ban against the Jews was relaxed: Nero's wife Poppaea Sabinus was sympathetic toward Judaism, if not a proselyte.³ The Jews slowly filtered back into Rome, and doubtless caused considerable trouble to the church. They would eventually inveigle Nero and the Empire in their war against the gospel. The first imperial persecution broke out in AD 64-68. It was widely believed that Nero was responsible for the burning of Rome (AD 64), and historians are agreed that he seized upon Christians as a scapegoat.⁴ It is against this background that Paul called the Jews "enemies of the gospel" (Rom. 11:28) and "vessels of wrath fitted to destruction," which God had borne with much longsuffering. Paul exhorted Christians not to

² "Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome." Suetonius, *Claudius* XXV, 4.

³ Josephus calls her a "religious woman." *Ant.* XX, viii, 11.

⁴ "But neither human help, nor imperial munificence, nor all the modes of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order. Therefore, to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits...Christians." Tacitus, *Annals* XV, xlv.

avenge themselves, but to give place to wrath (Rom. 12:19). They were to rouse themselves and watch, lest falling into spiritual slumber they be unprepared when the time of persecution preceding Christ's coming arrived. However, the "night" of persecution and oppression would soon be over and the "day time" of Christ's dominion would arise. The Roman and Jewish adversary ("Satan") would shortly be bruised beneath believers' feet.

Testimony of Corinthians

- *I Cor. 1:6-8 - "Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: so that ye are come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

The testimony of Christ received confirmation in the Corinthians by their obedience to the gospel. They then received the gifts of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of the apostle's hands (*cf.* Acts 8:17; 19:5, 6). The gifts of the Holy Ghost were merely temporary and provisional, belonging to the period between the cross and the second coming of Christ. Hence, Paul says the gifts were given to the Corinthians while waiting for the Lord's return, when they would cease. The passage assumes that the Corinthians will be alive in the day of Christ.

- *I Cor. 3:13 - "Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is."*

Although it contains no express declaration of time, this verse assumes the Corinthians would live until the day of testing by fire, which was to precede the coming of Christ. This almost certainly refers to the persecution under Nero, which would try the saints and prove what their work of faith was made of.

- *I Cor. 7:29 - "But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none."*

Here we see again that a very short while remained until the time of the end overtook the first generation of believers; so much so that not even the obligations of married life should be permitted to distract them from what lay ahead. The end time would include the persecution under Nero and the cataclysmic judgments attending Christ's coming in vindication of his gospel and martyrs.

Testimony of 1st Thessalonians

- *I Thess. 1:9, 10 - "For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come."*

Paul's letters to the Thessalonians contain a great deal of eschatological material. From the book of Acts, we learn that Paul was in Thessalonica hardly more than the space of three weeks (Acts 17:1-10). Although with the Thessalonians such a small space, it is clear that Paul invested much time instructing them about the second coming of Christ. This would make little sense if it was thousands of years away. But we see here that Paul's teaching and expectation was that Christ would come within his reader's lifetimes. The "wrath to come" may refer to events that would overtake the world, but more likely refers to the wrath awaiting men in the next life who fail to obey the gospel.

- *I Thess. 2:14-20 - "For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews: Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men: Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost. But we, brethren, being taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more abundantly to see your face with great desire. Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? For ye are our glory and joy."*

We read in Acts about Jewish opposition throughout the world to the gospel message. In its way, the book of Acts is an apologetic defense of the destruction of the Jewish nation, providing a detailed account of their resistance to the gospel and persecution of believers, and the righteous judgment of God in taking the nation away. This is nowhere more true than in Thessalonica. The Jews there not only stirred up persecution against Paul, forcing him to prematurely leave the city, but when they learned he was preaching in Berea, they came and stirred up trouble there as well, again forcing

Paul to depart (Acts 17:1-15). The passage quoted here thus predicts the coming wrath that was to overtake the nation in the war with Rome. Even Jews in foreign cities would become a prey, as the nation lost the protection of law at home and abroad (see below). Read in isolation, the connection between God's wrath upon the Jews and the coming of Christ may be unclear, but when taken in light of the rest of the New Testament, the connection is clear.

- *I Thess. 3:13 - "To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints."*

Every chapter of I Thessalonians speaks about Christ's coming, and every chapter places it in the Thessalonians lifetimes.

- *I Thess. 5:1-4 - "But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief."*

We read in Josephus that the Jewish population in many cities was destroyed when they revolted against Rome: 20,000 Jews were slain in Syria, and Caesarea was emptied of its Jewish inhabitants; 13,000 were slain in Scythopolis; 2,500 were slain in Askelon; 2,000 in Ptolemais, similar numbers were slain in Tyre, Hippos, and Gadara. 50,000 were slain in Alexandria.⁵ We can only imagine what occurred in the rest of the world, for the Jews were universally detested.

Testimony of 2nd Thessalonians

- *II Thess. 1:4-10 - "So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure: Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer: Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you; And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from*

⁵ Josephus, *Wars*, II, xviii.

heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day."

The epistles to the Thessalonians are believed to have been written while Claudius was still upon the throne (AD 41-54), probably in the 50's. The Jews' war with Rome did not break out until AD 66. The saints' longsuffering and patient endurance under persecution would finally be vindicated, and they would come into a time of rest when Jesus came in wrath against those who troubled his church. Clearly, this would offer small consolation if the events described were thousand of years off.

- *II Thess. 2:1-12 - "Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness."*

This passage states that the time was not "at hand," and thus seems to argue against a contemporary-historical fulfillment. However, since it is clear that the Thessalonians were taught to expect Christ's coming within their lifetimes, the fact that it was not then *immediately* at hand does not mean it was not fulfilled in the years following. The Reformers supposed the papacy and Catholic Church are referred to here, but nobody believes that today. Paul states that the man of sin and son of perdition (the antichrist) was *already present*, but had not yet been revealed upon the world stage because something and/or someone hindered him, who must first be taken out of the way. Since the papacy would not grow up for hundreds of years, this clearly is not the solution. Rather, we must look for a contemporary-historical explanation.

We believe that Nero and the first imperial persecution are in view here. The Thessalonians were shaken and troubled that Lord's coming and that their "gathering together unto him" was at hand. If their gathering entailed the translation or rapture of the church in a manner similar to Enoch and Elijah there would be nothing to disturb them, for this is universally supposed to be a good thing. Rather, the better view is that the gathering was a harvest by martyrdom, in which members of the church would be reaped into the eternal kingdom by death. This is clearly seen in Rev. 14:9-20, where two harvests are portrayed, one of the wicked (the grapes) in wrath and vengeance (vv. 17-20), the other of the church (the wheat) in martyrdom under the beast (vv.9-16). The persecution the Thessalonians suffered from the Jews and their own countrymen (I Thess. 2:14-16; II Thess. 1:6-10) apparently led them to believe that the eschatological persecution was then at hand. However, Paul reminded them that the time was not then fully ripe. Claudius Caesar was still upon the throne.

It was Claudius' policy to protect the church by extending the *religio licita* to it. Roman law preserved to the nations of the empire the right to worship their own gods and keep their own laws, saving the power of death (*ius gladii*), which was reposed in the Roman governor. It was this policy of Roman law in withholding the power of death from local peoples that permitted the church to grow and spread, as otherwise the Jews would have extinguished the gospel as soon as ever the light of salvation was lit (recall the persecution over Stephen). Acts records that the Jews disturbed the peace throughout the empire, persecuting Paul everywhere he carried the gospel. Indeed, the Jews raised their tumults to such a pitch in Rome that Claudius saw fit to banish from Italy (Acts 18:2). In the same chapter we learn of the banishment, we read how the Roman consul, Gallio (Seneca's brother), refused to sit in judgment of issues of Jewish law

religion, when the Jews sought judgment against Paul (Acts. 18:12-16). However, Claudius would soon be "taken out of the way;" he was poisoned by Agrippina, Nero's mother, in order to secure Nero's succession to the throne. Nero was but 16 when he came into power, and for the first ten years of his government was under the tutelage of Seneca and Burrus, who restrained his vicious temperament. Eventually, however, Nero threw off all restraint and began a reign of terror, culminating in the persecution of the church (AD 64-68). Yet, Nero would be destroyed by Christ's coming and judgment, and Rome itself thrown into a succession of civil wars that left Italy in ruins and the capital destroyed. The Jewish nation, which was ultimately responsible for the persecution, would be completely destroyed.

Testimony of Timothy

- *I Tim. 6:14 - "That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Timothy, Paul's companion in his work and travels, was expected to live and see Christ's return (*cf.* II Tim. 4:1-4).

Testimony of Hebrews

- *Heb. 10:25 - "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another; and so much the more as ye see the day approaching."*
- *Heb. 10:37 - "For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry."*

The Hebrew Christians were under persecution from unbelieving Jews, who put them out of the synagogues and imposed such penalties upon them as they might, including beating with rods, imprisonment, excommunication, and forfeitures. They were thus tempted to turn back to the temple ritual and Mosaic law. The thrust of the epistle is to demonstrate the superiority of Christ and the invalidity of the law, and its complete inability to save. They are warned that to forsake Christ and turn back to the law is apostasy and will cause them to lose their salvation (Heb. 10:26, 27). Hence, they needed the strength derived from their mutual faith and should thus continue assembling together, and the more so as the day of open persecution drew near. They were to draw strength from the assurance that it was but a short while more before the day of national judgment against the Jews arrived, when Christ would exact vengeance for the blood of his martyrs. Their reward was in heaven, and might thus bear the loss of mortal life happily (Heb. 11:16; 12:4).

Testimony of James

- *Jm. 5:5, 8, 9 - "Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh...Behold, the judge standeth before the door."*

This epistle is something of a companion to the book of Hebrews, being addressed to Jewish believers, many of whom were under persecution for unbelieving Jews. It is sometimes argued that in addressing the book to the "twelve tribes scattered abroad" James employs a metaphor for spiritual Israel. However, the better view is that James is addressing *actual Jews*. He characterizes those addressed as "first fruits" from among God's creatures, which term is specifically applied by John to the 144,000 taken from the Jews (Jm. 1:18; Rev. 14:4). James says they ought not to show partiality to the rich entering their assemblies, and especially in light of the fact that the rich "blaspheme the worthy by which ye are called" (Jm. 2:7). The word rendered "assembly" here is "synagogue," betraying a distinctly Jewish setting. And blaspheming the name of Christ and Christianity would have been prominent among the Jews, but far less so among the Gentiles. James also mentions how the rich had heaped treasure together for the last days, which, in view of the coming destruction of the Jewish nation, would have special meaning. He says, too, that they condemn and kill the just, which was not yet true among the Gentiles, for no general persecution had yet broken out, but was true among the Jews, who had raised a great persecution against the church in the days of Stephen. James also uses a distinctly Jewish term "Lord of the sabbath" to describe Jesus as the Lord who provides seed for crops and rain in due season, a term that would have no meaning among Gentiles (Jm. 5:4; *cf.* Rom. 9:29; Isa. 1:9). In all, there is good reason to see the epistle is addressed primarily to Jewish believers, and the coming of Lord, which he describes as drawing nigh, in reference to the calamity that brought the nation's end and relief from persecution.

Testimony of Peter

- *I Pet. 4:7 - "But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer."*
- *"I Pet. 4:17 - "For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and*

if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?"

These verses affirm the imminence of Christ coming and the events associated with the end (fulfillment) of age. God was bringing to a close the world-age that was marked by dominion of the unbelieving in the earth, for the government of the world had been given to Christ at his ascension, and he would thenceforth rule the nations in righteousness.

- *II Pet. 3:10-14 - "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless."*

This passage is often supposed to teach that the physical cosmos was to be destroyed at Christ's coming, but this mistakes the figurative nature of prophetic utterance. The promise of a new heaven and earth is from the prophet Isaiah, and describes the world under the government of Christ, after the persecutors of his people have all been destroyed. We cited the same prophecy earlier in our discussion about the trial of Stephen and the destruction of Jerusalem (see comments under Acts, above), whereby the reader may see that the heavens and earth and their elements describe, not the physical world, but the socio-political world gathered together in persecution of the church and gospel (Isa. 65, 66). Peter makes abundantly clear that the day of the Lord was hastening upon them and would overtake those then living. Hence, they should be diligent to be found blameless before Christ.

Testimony of John

- *I Jn. 2:18, 19 - "Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrist; whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us; but*

they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us."

The "last time" in the Greek is "last hour." John gives as evidence of the last hour the fact that many antichrists were then present in the world. The "antichrist" refers to St. Paul's "man of sin" and "son of perdition" described in II Thessalonians, or Nero, who would wage war against the church at the Jews' instigation, seeking to eradicate it from earth. Those who "went out from us" correspond to the "apostasy" Paul said would precede the persecution of Nero and doubtless points to Judaizers who abandoned the faith, teaching that the law was still valid and that Christians must be circumcised to be saved. James uses the identical phrase following the Jerusalem council, saying "Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which **went out from us** have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, ye must be circumcised, and keep the law," etc. (Acts 15:24). The phrase may also include Gentiles who apostatized from the faith and had turned to become persecutors, but we think those primarily referred to are Jews.

Testimony of Revelation

- *Rev. 1:1, 3 - The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servant things which must shortly come to pass...Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.*

Here we have the opening words of Revelation, assuring first century readers that the time was *at hand*. Revelation describes the persecution under Nero and the destruction of Rome and Jerusalem by the coming of Christ. The book is intended to strengthen the saints in Asia Minor and the world against the coming persecution; to assure them that Christ is fully aware of the suffering they will endure for his name's sake. He is the Lord who was dead and is alive and holds the keys of death and Hades; he will reward them with eternal life if they are faithful unto death.

- *Rev. 2:5 - "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent."*

The Ephesians were resting upon the strength of past works for their present and future salvation. Christ tells them that they must persevere in their first love and works, or risk his rejection at his coming. It has been argued that this refers to a special coming in judgment

against that particular church, but this seems unlikely. Peter said *"For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God"* (I Pet. 4:17), which judgment was connected with the time then overtaking the world, and not a special judgment confined to the church. What was true in Peter, is equally true in Revelation.

- Rev. 2:16 - *"Repent: or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth."*
- Rev. 2:25 - *"But that which ye have already hold fast till I come."*

The first quote was said to the church at Pergamos, the second to Thyatira. Both passages affirm Christ's coming within the lives of those addressed.

- Rev. 3:3 - *"Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee."*
- Rev. 3:11 - *"Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown."*

These quote address the churches of Sardis and Philadelphia, respectively. It has been suggested that these churches represent distinct ages until the Lord's coming, but there is no exegetical support for this notion. The notion is but an invention to try to salvage Futurist interpretation and transfer the prophecies of Revelation to our own day or beyond. In reality, the need to invent such fantastic notions testifies to the true *contemporary-historical* moorings of the book and prophecies.

- Rev. 16:15 - *"Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame."*
- Rev. 22:6, 7 - *"And he said unto me, These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done. Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the saying of the prophecy of this book."*

As the book draws to its close, there are repeated affirmations of Christ's soon advent. The righteous would be harvested into the eternal kingdom by

martyrdom under Nero and the Jews; the wicked would be destroyed in the wars and calamities that overtook Rome and Judea.

- Rev. 22:10-12 - *"And he saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand. He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And, behold, I come quickly: and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be."*

When Daniel wrote, he was told to "seal up" the sayings of his book, because the time was long away off (Dan. 12:4, 9). The distance from Daniel to John was approximately 600 years. John is here told *not* to seal the book, because its events were "at hand." Based upon a comparison with Daniel, it is impossible that the events of Revelation belong to our time, for by no standard of measure can two thousand years be deemed "at hand" in light of 600 years in Daniel being a long way off. So close were the events, that the time remaining would hardly afford men time to change their accustomed habits, and would thus take the wicked and just as it found them. However, it is a mistake to conceive that all men were judged in the events described in Revelation, for Christ is enthroned as judge still today. One by one as each of us dies are haled before the judgment seat of Christ, that we may receive the things done in the body, according to that we have done, whether it be good or bad (II Cor. 5:10).

- Rev. 22:20 - *"He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus."*

Summary and Conclusion

We have now surveyed the time statements of the New Testament. Old Testament time texts, particularly from the book of Daniel, are consistent with all that has been said, but will be examined separately in a subsequent article. Of the 37 passages we have examined, all unanimously affirm Christ's coming within the lives of the first disciples. Where can such an array of witnesses be produced on behalf of Futurist models? It can't.

Why am I Preterist? Because dealing openly and honestly with the simple statements of scripture prevents otherwise. We urge you to join the growing crowd of students and scholars *"affirming Christ's second coming fulfilled."*

Questions from our Readers

Q: Kurt,

I discovered your article, "What is the Creation of Rom. 8:19-23?" What a great passage from which to pay close attention to pronouns. The term, "**whole creation**" certainly does seem to represent both *humankind*, meaning *every nation* (saved and unsaved). Yet "**they**" follows closely, and in the sentence construction seems to address *unsaved* humankind. Although Paul's reference to "**firstfruits of the Spirit**" commonly refers to the Jews response to the gospel, as you remind us, the word "**ourselves**" seems to be used by Paul to communicate to the *saved* that regeneration does not exclude them from the pain and travail that would continue in their(and our) fleshly existence. Both saved and unsaved will suffer in their bodies. Since he is writing to the Gentile church in Rome, perhaps Paul in this case is using his Jewish expression to include his Gentile readers with himself as firstfruits by use of "**we**" twice and "**our**" in reference to the authentic or converted Jew, whose heart has been circumcised. However, I am not certain this was Paul's intended use of "**firstfruits**" here. Certainly his purpose was to encourage his flock to persevere, awaiting the receipt of their eternal inheritance in heaven marking their change (the redemption of their body) at the last trumpet, as you have explained it to us in your article.

Thanks Kurt, and show me where my understanding is incorrect or incomplete. We, your readers, are glad to have you as our teaching shepherd.

A: You are right that the passage can with equal validity describe the unsaved ("they") and the saved ("ourselves"). It is the use of "firstfruits" that has tended to guide my interpretation as describing Jews and Gentiles. However, I may very well be wrong in seeing the "firstfruits" in reference to the Jews, as opposed to the whole first generation of believers. In the end it is impossible to say dogmatically which is right, but I have had this called to my attention once before and have been trying to decide which is the more defensible. For now, I still feel that the weight of evidence leans in favor in the Jews being the firstfruits in this passage.

Q: Hi Kurt,

Can you help me out here - this one has been puzzling me...

Jesus speaking to the 12 disciples...

"Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I WILL COME AGAIN, and (at that time) receive you to Myself; so that where I AM, there YOU may be also (John14:1-3).

Since most of the disciples were dead BEFORE Jesus returned in 70 AD - WHERE were they in the meantime? Jesus says that WHEN HE RETURNED He would **take them to be with Him**. Were they soul sleeping? Were they in Hades (Abes bosom)? This one is stumping me.

A: Thanks for writing,

Yes, the dead went to Hades priors to the general resurrection. Paul describes this resurrection in I Thess. 4:16, saying, the Lord would descend with a shout and the dead would be raised. I believe that is what is referred to in the passage you quote. However, it is also true that Christ gathered the living saints by martyrdom into his kingdom during the Neronean persecution (see Rev. 14:1-15).

Q: Someone asked me recently, "Where is Satan himself is now? How would you answer this? Also, how would you deal with the Gaderene Demoniac? "*We are legion for we are many*" and Jesus casting the demons out into the pigs etc?

A: Thanks for writing. I have never been persuaded that there are supernatural being or demons, but feel this is better explained as the superstitious jargon of the day. What we call epilepsy today, they thought was demonic possession back then. What we call insanity today, they called demonic possession, etc. The father who met Jesus after the mount of Transfiguration, said his son was "lunatic" in Matthew, but Luke describes him as being seized by a "spirit" which cast him down foaming and crying (Matt. 17:15; Lk. 9:37-42). The Greek definition given by Berry in his Interlinear Greek New Testament says the term "lunatic" means epilepsy, confirming what I said. The man called legion may have suffered from insanity and some sort of multiple personality disorder. In all these cases, it is just as easy to understand these in reference to physical

and mental illness as it is demonic possession. Since all these sorts of things are with us today, but we do not ascribe them to demons, why should we interpret the same maladies differently in the Bible merely because of the names employed?

The source of evil is the lust of man's flesh, which is still very much alive and well and we wrestle against it every day. The physical and emotional diseases associated with sin and the fall are all around us and ever will be. The word "Satan" means "adversary" and is many times translated that way in the Bible and applied to men. Do a word study in the OT on "adversary" and see how the word is also translated Satan, and see how many times it is used of men and governments. I don't believe in supernatural devils, but it is not a topic I go out of my way to talk about, since most people cannot receive it. The dragon/devil/satan thrown into the lake of fire in Revelation was the Roman government persecuting the church, which was destroyed in the civil wars of AD 69-70.

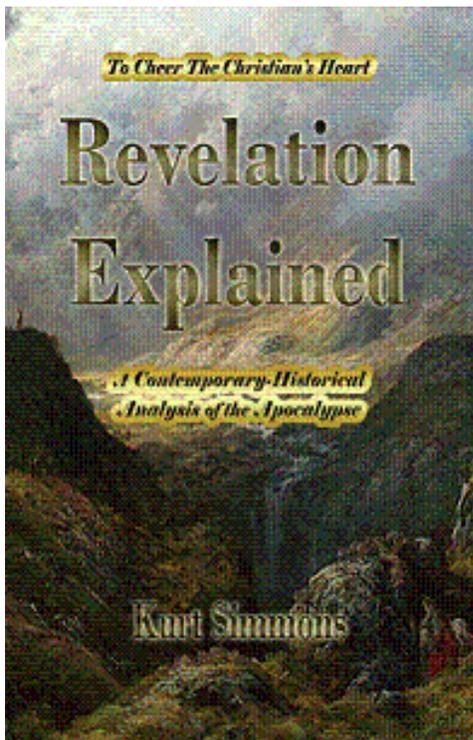
Hope that helps.

Q: Fascinating perspective! Thanks Kurt. How would you deal with Matthew 4 and Satan tempting Jesus?

Was this the Jewish Leadership perhaps? How did they take him to the pinnacle of the temple and offer Him the kingdoms of the world etc. Is there a good book on this topic? I love this!

A: Jesus' temptation was from his flesh, just like yours and mine. He hungered, he was tempted with world power, and he was tempted to doubt his identity and test God. These are all the sort of internal dialogues we have with ourselves all the time. The gospel's express the *internal battle* in terms of an *external foe* apparently for purposes of communicating difficult lessons in terms everyone can understand. Remember, the Bible never defines who/what the devil is or where he came from. All that supplied by human invention/interpretation.

I do not know of any books on the topic I can recommend. But in the fourth chapter of my commentary on Daniel, we provide some great quotes from Bishop Lightfoot in our comments about Nebuchadnezzar's madness.



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Church and State

Ariel Simmons

The question of “Church and State” is hotly debated and emotionally charged. One side of the debate argues that Church and State should be totally separate, and that the State cannot endorse or appear to promote any form of religion. The other side urges that religion occupies an important place in society and is entitled to its own voice, and a certain amount of interaction is inevitable and even desirable. Those who argue for complete separation claim that the Founding Fathers, particularly Thomas Jefferson, meant it so. Those on the other side also claim to have the Founding Fathers’ support. Determining which side is correct will affect how we act and respond toward politics and religion. The purpose of this piece is to bring forth evidence to determine which view is historically correct, and, therefore, what America was meant to be.

I believe there can be no question: the great majority of the Founders believed that religion can and should have a place in our public institutions. Looking at history we see the Founders believed Church and State required interaction with one another, and that the government could and should advance the Christian faith (DeMar, 1990).

Quotes and events show where the Founders stood, and why. The fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence were all affiliated with Christianity. Thirty-eight attended main stream Christian denominations; the other eighteen were distributed among Quaker, Catholic, Unitarian, and Episcopalian/Deist (Lossing, 1848). Over 92% of the fifty-six delegates who signed the U.S. Constitution claimed Christian beliefs (Ferris 1976).

My experience is that the most commonly used reference by those arguing for separation is Thomas Jefferson’s phrase, “a wall of separation of Church and State” (Walenta 2010). This phrase does not occur in the U.S. Constitution or Amendments, but in a private letter written by Jefferson to the Danbury Baptist Association in 1802. Jefferson had no part in writing the Constitution, but was in France at the time (Miller Center 2011). Therefore, his view cannot guide our interpretation of the Constitution or Bill of Rights. Even so, it is worth noting that Jefferson funded Christian missions for the [Kaskaskia](#) Indians, paid for with federal money (Barton, 2011). Moreover, church

services were held in the hall where Congress met for many years. Jefferson and many other presidents attended church regularly at the Capitol building (Barton, 2005).

In 1782, Congress itself printed the first Bible in English in America. The quote inside the cover explains the reason of their action, “A neat Edition of the Holy Scriptures for the use of schools.” Here we see that Congress encouraged teaching and use of the Bible in America, and saw no Constitutional restraint upon its doing so. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence who also attended Congress, showed the significance that was placed on the Bible when he said that “the Bible should be read in our schools in preference to all other books.”

Numerous quotes show the Biblical foundation inside of America’s government, laws, and institutions. The following quotes show that the Church was indeed encouraged and supported in government by our Founders. George Washington recognized Christianity’s importance in government when he said that it was “Impossible to rightly govern a nation without God and the Bible” (DeMar 1990). Joseph Story, a lawyer and jurist that served on the U.S. Supreme Court from 1811 to 1845, said that he believed Christianity necessary for a civil society, that Christianity in the common law was one of the beautiful boasts of our jurisprudence, and that “there never has been a period in which the Common Law did not recognize Christianity as laying its foundations” (DeMar 1990).

From these quotes we see that the State involved in Church, and Church involved in State, was not only important but necessary to the Founders’ beliefs in bettering society. According to Noah Webster, an outspoken supporter of the Constitution, the Bible, especially the New Testament, was needed for providing proper understanding of America’s laws and the “source of correct republican principles” (DeMar 1990). As we can see, Jefferson’s phrase declaring the need for a “wall of separation” cannot be interpreted as shutting the Church out of government, or government out of religion, but only excluding government intervention in Church affairs, for example, in England the government appointed bishops for the church.

I believe the evidence thus shows that the Founding Fathers' thought that Church and State were to work together. Congress, presidents, and Supreme Court justices from the founding era all affirmed the need of Christianity for the health and liberty of the nation. In order to uphold the Founders' meaning and intent the State must be influenced by and active in forwarding Christianity. On the other hand the State should not be involved in Church administrative offices and affairs. The Founders intended certain arenas for both Church and State, for America's benefit and better understanding of the spirit and intent of our Constitution.

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