

Preterism

PRETERISM TEACHES that the New Testament prophecies regarding the end of the world and the Second Coming were fulfilled in 70 AD during the destruction of Jerusalem. Preterists believe that the book of Revelation has already been fulfilled. This is how Wikipedia defines preterism:

Preterism is an interpretation of Christian eschatology which holds that most or all of the biblical prophecies concerning the End Times refer to events which have already happened in the first century after Christ's birth. The system also claims that Ancient Israel finds its continuation or fulfillment in the Christian church at the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The term preterism comes from the Latin *praeter*, which is listed in Webster's 1913 dictionary as a prefix denoting that something is "past" or "beyond." This signifies that either all or a majority of Bible prophecy was fulfilled by 70 A.D. Adherents of Preterism are sometimes known as Preterists.

Preterists fall into two camps. **Full preterists** believe that *all* prophecy has been fulfilled, including the Resurrection, the Second Coming, and the Final Judgment. They believe that there is no unfulfilled prophecy in the entire Bible and that *all* of Revelation has already happened. They base their theory on this verse:

Matthew 24:34: "Verily I say unto you, **This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.**"

They believe that "this generation" refers to the generation that was alive when Christ spoke these words. Since Christ talked about the "great tribulation" (Matthew 24:21), the Second Coming (Matthew 24:30), and the final judgment (Matthew 24:31), they believe that all of those things must have happened to that generation. (That's right – they believe that Jesus Christ has already come back.)

Partial preterists find it difficult to believe that the Second Coming and the final judgment have already happened. They teach that the *real* Second Coming and final judgment are still in the future and that Matthew 24 was talking about something else. Both views agree, though, that most of the prophecies in the New Testament were fulfilled in 70 AD and that the pre-millennial beliefs regarding the Rapture, Tribulation, and Antichrist are a lot of nonsense.

For the purposes of this paper I'm going to focus on why I disagree with *partial* preterism. If you are a *full* preterist and honestly believe that the resurrection of the dead, the return of Christ, and the final judgment has already happened then there's probably nothing I could say that would change your mind. I just can't take that view seriously.

So let's get started!

Dates

Preterism teaches that Revelation foretells the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. In order for this to be true the book of Revelation must have been written *before* 70 AD. However, the

overwhelming weight of evidence suggests that the book was written decades *after* 70 AD – specifically, around 96 AD.

We know this because Irenaeus told us this in his work *Against Heresies*, which was written in the mid to late 100's. Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp, who in turn studied under the apostle John. Irenaeus testified that book of Revelation was written toward the end of the reign of Domitian, who ruled from 81 – 96 AD. There are others who testified of this date as well. Even more significantly, *no one suggested an earlier date for hundreds of years*. The oldest manuscripts and letters say that Revelation was written decades *after* 70 AD.

But there is more. Note this passage in Revelation:

Revelation 2:13: “I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even I those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.”

Antipas was the bishop of Pergamum, the very church to whom this letter was written. In this passage the martyrdom of Antipas is seen as a *past* event. When did Antipas die? He was martyred by Domitian in 92 AD. Since Antipas died *before* Revelation was written, and Antipas died in 92 AD, the book must have been authored *after* 92 AD.

But that's not all! John testified that he was on the island of Patmos when he received the vision:

Revelation 1:9: “I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.

10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet,

11 Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asian; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.

...

19 Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter;”

Why does this matter? Because John was exiled to the isle of Patmos by *Domitian*, who reigned from 81 – 96 AD. If John received the vision on the isle of Patmos then he couldn't possibly have written it before 70 AD because he wasn't exiled to Patmos until long *after* 70 AD!

In my opinion this alone is enough to conclusively refute preterism. Revelation can't possibly be foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem because by the time the book was written its destruction was old history. It's an open-and-shut case. But there are many other reasons to seriously doubt preterism.

Church History

Preterism teaches that the prophecies of the New Testament were fulfilled in 70 AD when Jerusalem was destroyed. This brings up an important question: is that what the early church believed? The answer is no. The list of people in the early church who believed that Revelation had not yet been

fulfilled is actually quite long. To quote one site:

Second, all Christian writers in at least the first two centuries of the church were futurists, not preterists. Even most partial preterists will concede this point. Am I to conclude that they all were wrong, that the Holy Spirit has now revealed something to us that He did not reveal to them? People such as Ignatius, the third bishop of Antioch and one who was personally acquainted with the apostles themselves; Papias, the bishop of Hieropolis (across the valley from Colossae), a friend of the apostle John; and Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna and another person who knew the Apostle John, were strong futurists. Did they misunderstand what they had been taught? Ignatius writes to Polycarp and urges him to "Look for Him who is above all time, eternal and invisible, yet who became visible for our sakes . . ." (Chapter 3). The Epistle of Barnabas, written around 100 A.D., anticipated the coming of the Antichrist and the return of Christ (Chapter 4). Polycarp writes "He comes as the Judge of the living and the dead" (Epistle to the Philippians, chapter 2). Papias writes that there will be a millennium after the resurrection of the dead when the personal reign of Christ will be established on the earth (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapter 39). Justin Martyr who lived from 110 to 165 A.D. writes: "But I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned and enlarged, as the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare" (Dialogue with Trypho, Chapter 80). Irenaeus states that those who heard Jesus teach testified that Jesus taught a future literal millennial reign on the earth, a time when the earth will yield a richness unimagined. Irenaeus goes farther to state that the coming of Christ will be preceded by the Antichrist reigning 3 and 1/2 years in Jerusalem, setting Himself up as God Himself. Irenaeus also tells us that there there will be 6,000 years of this earth before Jesus returns and sets up His thousand year reign. Irenaeus states all of this in the second century A.D.

Even closer to the apostles, Clement of Rome, who may have been the Clement mentioned in Philippians 4:3, and who probably was with Paul at Philippi, expected the return of Christ. The preterists and partial preterists will argue that Clement wrote before 70 A.D., because he speaks about sacrifices being offered in Jerusalem. But most scholars disagree and date Clement's letter around 90 A.D. In any event, the unbroken view of those closest to the apostles and those who had a reason to understand what the apostles taught on the subject were all futurists. There is not a preterist among them.

(taken from <http://truthsaves.org/doctrine/preterist.shtml>)

The point of all this is that if Revelation, the Second Coming, the Tribulation, and all the rest were fulfilled in AD 70, it is *astounding* that the early church missed it entirely. Even people who *studied under the apostles themselves* believed that it had not yet been fulfilled! If preterism is true then that is really quite shocking. I think the reason the early church was not preterist was because the apostles did not teach them preterism – and the apostles did not teach them preterism because preterism is not true.

The Olivet Discourse

As we've already mentioned, preterists believe that the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 has already taken place. Let's take a look at this passage and see what it actually says.

First, Matthew 24 states that before the Lord returns the gospel will be preached to all nations:

Matthew 24:14: "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come."

Was the gospel actually preached in *all* the world, to *all* nations, before 70 AD? That seems unlikely; even *two thousand years later* the gospel *still* hasn't been preached in all the world! There are countless groups that have not yet been reached.

Jesus also mentioned something called the "abomination of desolation":

Matthew 24:15: "When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:)

16 Then let him which be in Judea flee into the mountains:"

Here Christ talks about something terrible that was going to stand in the Holy Place of the Temple. The disciples would have instantly understood what He meant because this had happened before. During the Maccabean Revolt (168 BC – 135 BC) Antiochus IV Epiphanes outlawed Jewish sacrifices, pillaged the temple, and set up altars to Greek gods inside the Temple. A statue of Zeus was actually placed on the altar itself. Not only did he loot the Temple, but he repurposed it for the service of false gods.

Some have said that the "abomination of desolation" that's mentioned in Matthew 24:15 is a reference to the Maccabean revolt, but notice that Christ commands His disciples to be *looking for it*. He depicts it as a *future* event – a sign they need to be watching for. This tells me that the fulfillment of that prophecy was still in the future when Christ gave it.

This creates a problem for preterists because when the Romans invaded Jerusalem in 70 AD they didn't repurpose the temple, they destroyed it. They did not set up altars to false gods in its Holy Place. The events that Christ described simply did not happen at that time.

But there is more. Look at what the next verses say:

Matthew 24:21: "For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not **since the beginning of the world to this time**, no, nor ever shall be.

22 And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened."

Do you see what Christ said? He told his disciples that this period of "great tribulation" (which preterists say is a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD) is the worst event to ever happen *in all of human history*. Nothing worse would *ever* happen. This means that it was a bigger disaster than World War II or the Holocaust. It was even worse than the Flood that wiped out the entire planet! Are we supposed to believe that the destruction of one Middle Eastern city in 70 AD is the most terrible, epic disaster that the world has ever seen?

Christ actually goes on to say that if He did not divinely step in and put an end to the "great tribulation", it would actually kill *every living thing on the planet*. Jesus actually said "except those days should be shortened, there should **no flesh** be saved". Were the lives of every single living

creature on Earth put in grave danger when the Romans sacked Jerusalem in 70 AD? Absolutely not. Not only did it not imperil the entire planet, and not only was it not the worst event in world history, but it wasn't even the worst event in *Jewish* history. Yes, one million Jews died when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD, but *six* million Jews died in the Holocaust, which wiped out 2/3rds of their entire population.

In fact, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD wasn't even as bad as the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. In 586 BC the Jews were scattered all over the world, and they were *still* scattered in 70 AD. When Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD it was devastating, but Jews continued to live in Jerusalem after that until the Bar Kochba rebellion of 136 AD. Plus, in 70 AD the Jews had synagogues and local populations all over the world – unlike 586 BC, where their civilization was basically destroyed.

By no stretch of the imagination can you say that Matthew 24:21-22 has been fulfilled yet. The destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD does not even come close to fitting the description of “the most terrible epic disaster in all of history”.

The passage goes on:

Matthew 24:29: “Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken:

30 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.

31 And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

Notice that verse 29 says that these things will happen *immediately* after the tribulation of those days. This is why full preterists teach that the Second Coming and the Final Judgment happened in 70 AD – after all, if verses 5 through 28 happened in 70 AD then it's only consistent to say that the rest happened back then as well, since verse 29 does use the word “immediately after”. Partial preterists realize how ridiculous it is to say that the Second Coming and final judgment have already happened and so they distance themselves from this, saying that “immediately” doesn't actually mean “immediately” or that this is talking about a *different* Second Coming. Some say that Christ *did* come back in 70 AD, even though no one actually noticed (despite the fact that verse 30 makes it pretty clear *everyone* will notice).

To me this is just more evidence that preterism doesn't make any sense.

Nero

The New Testament is very clear that there will be an Antichrist; Revelation has a lot to say about this. Preterists teach that these passages are all speaking of Nero. As evidence they offer the fact that in Latin his name adds up to 666. However, there are problems with this theory.

First of all, Nero's name only adds up to 666 if you use his Latin name. The New Testament, however, was written in *Greek*, and Nero's name doesn't add up to 666 in Greek. When the early church speculated about the identity of the Antichrist (because they didn't believe in preterism!) they used the *Greek* alphabet, not the Latin one.

But that is a minor point. 2 Thessalonians 2 offers a detailed description of what the Antichrist is going to do. Let's compare that to the life of Nero:

2 Thessalonians 2:3: “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;

4 Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshiped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.

5 Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things?

...

8 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;

9 Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders,

10 And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved.”

Here we find out that the Antichrist is going to go into the temple of God and proclaim himself to be God. This is a reference to the “abomination of desolation” that Christ mentioned in the Olivet discourse.

Did Nero do this? Absolutely not. In fact, he never even *visited* Jerusalem! On top of that, Nero committed suicide in 68 AD so he wasn't even *around* in 70 AD. He didn't march to Jerusalem with his armies (as the Scripture says the Antichrist will do) in order to take over the Temple and sit in its Holy Place. None of that happened. In fact, as I pointed out earlier, *nobody* did that. No one in 70 AD even came close to matching the biblical description of the Antichrist.

But there is more. Revelation itself talks about what the Antichrist (which it calls “the beast”) will do:

Revelation 19:19: “And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army.

20 And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshiped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone.”

In 70 AD did the “kings of the earth” make war against Jerusalem? No – only the Roman Empire did. Did *Nero* make war against Jerusalem in 70 AD? No – he was dead at the time. Was Nero cast alive into the Lake of Fire? No – he committed suicide. Did the Roman army battle the armies of Heaven and lose? No – the Roman army sacked Jerusalem and destroyed it.

It's worth noting that 2 Thessalonians teaches that when the Lord returns He will immediately *defeat the Antichrist* (2 Thes. 2:8). But in 70 AD there was no Antichrist, and the details of the battle don't come close to matching the events described in Revelation – all of which is more evidence against preterism.

Must Shortly Come To Pass

Preterism rests its entire argument on this passage:

Revelation 1:1: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John:

2 Who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw.

3 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.”

They teach that “must shortly come to pass” means the events in Revelation must have happened long ago, when the book was written. After all, almost two thousand years has gone by since the book was written! How could that possibly be “soon”?

This is actually a very good point – in fact, it's their strongest argument. The problem is that whenever the Old Testament talks about the coming “great tribulation” (which it often refers to as the Day of the Lord) it *also* uses words like “soon” and “near,” even though the events were at least centuries away:

Ezekiel 30:1: “The word of the Lord came again unto me, saying,

2 Son of man, prophesy and say, Thus saith the Lord God, Howl ye, Woe worth the day!

3 For the day is near, even the day of the Lord is near, a cloudy day; it shall be the time of the heathen.”

Joel 1:15: “Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come.”

Joel 2:1: “Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand;

2 A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains: a great people and a strong; there hath not been ever the like, neither shall be any more after it, even to the years of many generations.”

Notice that Joel makes it plain that he is speaking about a very special event – the “Day of the Lord” will be unlike anything anyone has ever seen. Nothing like it has ever happened before and nothing like it would ever happen again. This exactly matches the description of the “great tribulation” that Christ spoke of in Matthew 24:21, which preterists say must have happened in 70 AD because Revelation uses the phrase “the time is at hand”. And yet in *Joel's* day it was *also* said to be “at hand” – centuries before Christ was born in Bethlehem! To use preterist logic, since it was “at hand” in Joel's day does that mean that the things Christ spoke of happened centuries before Jesus was born in Bethlehem? Of course not!

If these were the only passages that said the “Day of the Lord” was near, that would be enough to show that the preterist interpretation of Revelation 1:1-3 is wrong. But there are others. In fact, whenever the Old Testament talked about the “Day of the Lord” it was very common for them to say that it was at hand:

Obadiah 1:15: "For the day of the Lord is near upon all the heathen: as thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee: thy reward shall return upon thine own head."

Zephaniah 1:7: "Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord God: for the day of the Lord is at hand: for the Lord hath prepared a sacrifice, he hath bid his guests."

Zephaniah 1:14: "The great day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the Lord: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly.

15 That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness."

I think I've made my point. This time of great trouble (or "tribulation") that Christ spoke of in Matthew 24 was actually talked about extensively in the Old Testament by the prophets. It was common for them to say that it was at hand, just as is repeated in Revelation. In other words, the prophets of God have said that the "great tribulation" is near for *centuries*.

How can that be? I realize preterists don't like this passage, but the answer can be found in 2 Peter 3:

2 Peter 3:7: "But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.

8 But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

9 The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

10 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."

These verses tell us that God seems time differently than we do. To Him the passage of a thousand years is like the passage of a single day. From God's vantage point very little time has passed since these prophecies were given.

Preterists object to that use of this passage, but notice verse 10. What is Peter talking about? Why, he's talking about *the day of the Lord*. He's addressing this very issue! Other people were also wondering why the Lord said He was coming soon when so much time had passed without anything happening. Peter explained that in God's view of things it hadn't been very long, and the reason He has been waiting is because He is "not willing that any should perish." He wants to give men an opportunity to repent and be saved. I think this passage is *highly* relevant to the discussion.

Habakkuk has this to say:

Habakkuk 2:3: "For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry."

I think that sums it up pretty well.

There is a great deal more I could say about preterism but I think I've made my point. I believe

preterism does a very poor job of interpreting the Scriptures and is completely wrong. Preterism simply fails the evidence test. For these reasons and many others it cannot be the correct interpretation of end-times prophecy.