



# Preterism & The book of Revelation

A THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

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## INTRODUCTION

For many the book of Revelation remains one of the most enigmatic and controversial books of the bible. Anyone who has studied the eschatological portions of scripture will be immediately struck by the vast divergence of opinions that exist concerning the interpretation of Revelation. This interpretative debate has been raging for thousands of years and shows no signs of abating. An unfortunate corollary of these "interpretive wars" has been that the majority of Christians consider the contents too problematic to interpret and consequently marginalise the book to practical obscurity. The influence of German rationalism and the historico-critical method in the eighteenth century almost resulted in an untimely death for the book of Revelation. However a nineteenth century revival of fundamental evangelicalism restored the futurist eschatological position to prominence.

Four main interpretive systems for the book of revelation have emerged. These are broadly classified as preterism, idealism, historicism and futurism. From among these preterism and futurism have become the two major positions within Christendom. In this paper I will seek to explain and critique the preterist interpretation of the book of Revelation from a futurist position. The preterists justification for their interpretation that the events in the book of Revelation were fulfilled in A.D. 70 with the fall of Jerusalem is supported by three main arguments. Firstly, they depend heavily upon the so called "time texts" of Revelation using words like "quickly" (2:16) and "shortly"

(22:6) as the basis for their interpretation. Secondly the preterist thesis that the beast of Revelation 13 is a descriptive passage describing the reign of Roman Emperor Nero places the contents into a first century setting. Thirdly the preterist interpretation is heavily reliant upon the early dating of the authorship of Revelation. So pivotal is this issue that if it could be established that Revelation was written after the events of A.D. 70 then preterism would be impossible. My objectives in this paper will be to briefly outline the beliefs of those espousing a preterist hermeneutic. Then I will engage with their exegesis of the relevant "time texts" in order to establish their validity. The Neronic interpretation of Revelation 13 and the preterist claim for an early date of Revelation (A.D. 64-67) will also be examined. If a successful critique of these 3 legs can be established then the entire preterist system will fall with them.

## **WHAT IS PRETERISM?**

Due to the nature of the apocalyptic writings such as Revelation there exists a multitude of different viewpoints on particular issues even among those who identify with one of the main interpretive approaches. As George Ladd readily concedes "the interpretation of this book has been the most difficult and confusing of all the books of the New Testament" (Ladd 1993:670). The system known as preterism has two sub-divisions, labelled "full" preterism and "partial" preterism. Full preterism is for the most part a very minority view today with even mild preterists declaring it to fall "outside of the creedal

orthodoxy of Christianity” (Gentry 1995:20). The primary difference separating them is the full preterist’s insistence that all prophecy, including the second coming and the bodily resurrection of believers has already occurred with the events of 70 A.D.

Today when people use the term preterist they generally mean partial preterism and I will use this term generically unless otherwise stated. The recent growth of preterism has been largely due to the influence of a number of well-known figures such as R.C. Sproul, Hank Hanegraaff and theologians such as R.T. France and N.T. Wright. Preterists argue for a first-century fulfilment of Revelation by highlighting the parallels that exist between it and the Olivet Discourse. They further extrapolate that the events mentioned had to occur “in this generation” (Matthew 24:34) and that the “time is near” (Rev 1:3). Gentry says, “One of the most helpful interpretive clues in Revelation is the contemporary expectation of the author regarding the fulfilment of the prophecies” (Gentry 1989:133). From this, preterists like Gary North conclude that “all futurism, dispensationalism, premillennialism, and the more popular forms of amillennialism are dead wrong” (North 1993:45).

The preterist position takes very seriously the historical interpretation of Revelation. This is a real strength of the position and constitutes a serious attempt to understand the purpose the book would have served to the original hearers in the first century. Kenneth Gentry identifies what he believes to be the twofold dilemma that gave occasion for the recording of

the book. He says it serves two fundamental purposes relative to its original hearers. Firstly, it was written to prepare the Church for the coming persecution brought about by Imperial Rome. Secondly, it served to brace the Church for the coming reorientation in the course of redemptive history that would necessitate the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple system (Gentry 1989:15-16).

With these methodological presuppositions it is easy to understand the sustained approach to root the fulfilment of prophetic material into a first century context. This has become the distinctive characteristic of the preterist approach and ultimately without it the system could not be sustained.

## **PRETERIST TIME TEXTS IN REVELATION**

In order to support placing the events of Revelation into the first century preterists maintain that the fulfilment of these events were chronologically very near to the time they were written. To substantiate this view preterists appeal to a combination of different time texts that seem to expect a near fulfilment. In Matthews Gospel they appeal to 10:23 and 16:28 but principally their strongest text comes from the Olivet Discourse in Mathew 24:34 which clearly states that "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place". Contextually for the preterist this means that all the events mentioned in the Olivet discourse such as the "great tribulation" the

“abomination of desolation” and even the “second coming” must be fulfilled within the lifetime of the generation to whom Jesus was speaking. Gentry asserts that “this statement of Christ is indisputably clear and absolutely demanding of a first century fulfilment” (Gentry 1999:26-27). At first glance this interpretation appears extremely plausible and deals with the timing factor in this verse extremely well. However the more unfortunate consequence of this interpretation is that to be consistent the portion of the Olivet Discourse that graphically describes the second coming must also apply to the first century “this generation” group. It would seem that full preterists here are the more consistent of the two in regard to Matthew 24 and their hermeneutical methodology but they have to ignore a huge volume of biblical data found elsewhere that clearly indicates a visible physical second coming. Partial preterists like Sproul are left to prevaricate about how “in a real historical sense the parousia has already occurred” (1998:24). Sproul never satisfactorily deals with the implications of his system here he just declares that there is a “kind” of second coming in A.D. 70 that must be considered a significant visitation of the Lord in judgment but there still remains a literal second coming to occur later (Sproul 1998:203). Preterists view the book of Revelation as a thematic recapitulation of the Olivet Discourse so naturally they are forced to look for a first century fulfilment of this too. Gentry comments that it “seems John’s Revelation served as his exposition of the discourse” (Gentry 1989:130).

Full preterist John Noe explains that Preterists additionally buttress their view by literally honouring the time texts in Revelation 1:1 and 22:6 and also 1:3 and 22:10. He describes these as bookends, stating that they are seen as setting the historical context for the soon and now-past fulfilment of the whole prophecy (Noe 2006:771). Gentry maintains that the appearance of the phrase "soon" in 1:1 and 22:6 is significant because these chapters bracket the drama of the prophetic material of the book contained in-between these two sections (Gentry 1989:133). It is here that a significant deficiency in the preterist system can be exposed. Whilst Gentry's assertion is indeed correct he seems oblivious to the logical conclusion from this which is detrimental to his own brand of preterism. For if the word soon (*tachos*) found in 1:1 and 22:6 are bookends to the entire prophetic content of Revelation then whatever connotation one gives to these verses must also be applied to all of the events of the Apocalypse including chapters 20-22. This creates a devastating contradiction for the partial preterist like Sproul and Gentry who still claim that Revelation 20-22 await their fulfilment in a future Second Coming and resurrection. Logical consistency here demands that either a full preterist approach is taken or a view similar to the futurist interpretation is accepted. Since partial preterists are unwilling to move to full preterism with its denial of a literal second coming and future bodily resurrection and they are also unwilling to accept the alternative futurist option, they have to find ways around this problem. For if they claim that the events in chapter 20 through 22 are still future, as they do, then the word "soon" cannot mean soon in chronological sequence as they claim. This



means that this phrase may not carry the weight that partial preterists maintain it does in proving a first century fulfilment.

It seems preterists are aware of these implications and have developed ways to circumvent its full repercussions. N.T. Wright's novel solution for the soon return of Christ is to claim the early Christians believed that "when Jesus was 'lifted up' on the cross, and then raised from the dead. This was the real 'return of the Lord to Zion'" (Wright 2011:204). However this seems to ignore the disciples expectation of a future coming of Messiah to restore the Kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:7) and doesn't make sense of the early Christians use of the term *maranatha* (Our Lord come) in 1 Corinthians 16:22. Jay E Adams in his commentary on Revelation states that all of the prophecy in the first nineteen chapters and part of the twentieth has been fulfilled. He says that "at the very end, the prophecy reaches out beyond the contemporary picture to the future coming, judgment, and eternal state" (Adams 2000:49). However on the very next page Adams asserts that the term 'soon' in 1:1 is so clear that "these words make the futuristic interpretation an utter impossibility" (2000:50) he then highlights how the same contemporary timing phrase is used in 22:6 to make it doubly clear for interpreters. He ignores the fact that this second timing phrase is positioned contextually after the recording of specific events that Adams has already declared to be long in the future? A slightly different approach is taken by Gentry who seems to hold a "now but not yet" interpretation noting that "the new creation/Jerusalem of Revelation 21-22 began in the first century, although it

stretches out into eternity in its ultimate consummation" (1992:418-419). This approach suffers from the same deficiencies as the others. Gentry cannot be consistent by declaring that all the events in Revelation begun in the first century. Can the final release of Satan (20:7-9) and the final judgement (20:11-15) be said to begin within a few years of its composition? As Hitchcock concludes the failure of this view to account for all the events in Revelation within a chronological nearness renders this view invalid (2006:474).

If this is the case then how are we to understand these texts? The solutions for the futurist do not alleviate all the tensions found in these texts as comprehensively as some might like. For how could events legitimately be described as "soon" and "near" if their fulfilment is separated by over 200 years? Futurist approaches to these texts have gravitated towards two main explanations. One approach asserts that these texts should be more properly interpreted as qualitative indicators describing the manner in which Christ will return. They will occur "quickly" or "suddenly" once the appointed time arrives. This understanding seems to fall within the scope of legitimate meanings for the *tachos* family of words. The *tachos* family of words can be used to indicate "soon" relating to time, or "suddenly" relating to the manner in which something occurs. Proponents of this view point to the lexicographical support from lexicons like *BAG* which lists the following definitions for *tachos* "speed, quickness, swiftness, haste" (*BAG*: 814). Zodhiates notes that on the two occasions that this noun appears in

Revelation (1:1; 22:6), it is coupled with the preposition *en*, causing this phrase to function grammatically as an adverb revealing to us the sudden manner in which these events will take place (1992:1369). The second approach taken by Thomas in his commentary is to agree with the preterist notion of “soon” but shift the focus from chronological nearness to the imminence of the predicted events. Thomas states that the major thrust of Revelation is its emphasis upon the shortness of time before the fulfilment (1995:55). To say that relief will come “suddenly” offers no encouragement, but to say that it will come “soon” does. Philip E. Hughes says that “the interval between the comings of Christ is the time of the last days, and the last of these last days is always impending” (Hughes 1990:237). This view asserts that it does not necessarily follow that the events had to occur within a few years of composition rather they show that the New Testament authors consistently describe the present age, as the “last days”. This means that the last days have been ongoing for almost two thousand years (Hitchcock 2006:476). Mounce concludes that the most satisfying solution is to take the expression in a straightforward sense, remembering that in the prophetic outlook the end is always imminent. Time as a chronological sequence is of a secondary concern in prophecy” (Mounce 1998:41).

These solutions are not decisive, but do at least provide plausible solutions to the meaning of these texts without leaving us with the predicament of trying to place all the events in Revelation within a first century context as is logically demanded by preterism.

## **PRETERISM AND THE BEAST OF REVELATION 13**

Preterists view the first beast of Revelation 13 as the Roman Emperor Nero, meaning that the events don't await a future fulfilment. A further consequence of this identification means that in order to prophesy about events in Nero's life the book had to be written prior to these events in the mid-sixties A.D. Preterists have advanced a number of arguments to support the Neronic interpretation of Revelation 13. We will now examine a number of these.

The first argument we will look at is the death of the beast prophesied in Revelation 13:10 and 13:14. Preterists make the connection with Nero by noting that not only did believers suffer as martyrs under Nero but he himself also suffered a violent death by the sword. They argue that this would have been a great encouragement to the persecuted Churches he was addressing. This connection does not stand up to scrutiny as the links are tenuous at best. Firstly Nero committed suicide by stabbing himself in the throat (Kistemaker 2002:395) and secondly this interpretation misconstrues the geographical extent of the Neronic persecution. The persecution under Nero was confined to the locale of Rome and thus never reached the region of Asia Minor where the 7 recipient churches were located. Therefore it seems rather difficult to argue that this promise would serve as a word of encouragement to those Churches during the Neronic reign. Closely related to this argument is the preterist interpretation of Revelation 13:3 and 13:14 which specifies

that the beast will be mortally wounded yet return to life. Preterists argue that this verse is a reference to the Nero-*redivivus* myth, which seems to imply that there was a popular belief after Nero's death in A.D 68 that he was restored to life. N.T Wright tentatively proposes this interpretation in his commentary by suggesting that the rumours of Nero's restoration "might be what John is referring to" in verse 13:3 (Wright 2011:117). This view is doubtful however as it is unlikely that John or any other Christians believed the Nero-*redivivus* myth. The ancient Christian tradition reflected in the writings of Irenaeus, who was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a direct disciple of the apostle John, show no knowledge of a Nero-*redivivus* myth (Newman 1963:136). This view was unknown to the earliest church fathers being first suggested by Victorinus and popularised later by Augustine (Thomas 1995:158). To equate this view with the authorial intent of John in Revelation 13:3 and 13:14 "ascribes to John a false prophecy based upon silly superstition" (Smith 1988:311).

The second major argument used to identify the beast with Nero is the infamous 666 number found in Revelation 13:8. The text asks those with wisdom to calculate the number of his name. The meaning of this seems to involve the widely utilised practice of gematria. Preterists argue that using this method the sum of the numerical equivalents of the letters in Nero's name clearly identify him as the beast. Adams asserts that "the most plausible interpretation of Revelation 13:8 is that this was Nero Caesar" (Adams 2000:73). This view may be intriguing but upon closer inspection it

is plagued with problems. Adams quote above contains the first. In order to make the gematria value equal 666 they have to apply it to Nero's name but with the added title "Caesar". There is no justification for including this title in the calculation, the text clearly specifies "the number of his name" (13:17), Nero Caesar is not his name. Additionally in order to work the name must be transliterated from Greek back into Hebrew. This is suspect as the book is written in Greek. Mounce concludes "this solution asks us to calculate a Hebrew transliteration of the Greek form of a Latin name, and that with defective spelling" (Mounce 1998:262). It appears that preterists have selected the title due to its ability to fulfil the desired presupposed Neronic identification. These reasons are not exhaustive but at least demonstrate how the Neronic identification is unpersuasive.

### **PRETERISM AND THE DATE OF REVELATION.**

The traditional date for Revelation is A.D. 95-56, but preterists hold to the early date of A.D. 64-67. The early date is the linchpin of the preterist view and this view cannot stand without it. Mathison correctly affirms that if the late date is correct then "such a date would effectively rule out a preterist interpretation" (Mathison 1999:142). The problem is that John does not clearly identify a date for composition. This means that the entire preterist system is founded upon an assumption that is not specifically stated in the text. Thus in effect, the preterist understanding of the book depends upon something that is not specifically revealed in the book itself. Clearly an

interpretive system must have a hermeneutical basis in the text without being dependent upon the date, which may be impossible to establish with certainty? Gentry is credited with producing the most thorough defence of the early date in *Before Jerusalem Fell*. In this volume he provides a large portfolio of scholars he identifies as "early date advocates" to bolster his contention that the early date has significant scholarly acceptance (Gentry 1989:83). The majority of Gentry's work is spent trying to explain away comments that indicate a late date. Perhaps the most famous is that of Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202) who clearly states in his comments on Revelation 13:8 that "our generation (John's) is toward the end of Domitian's reign" (Cruse 2006:83). Preterists must neutralise this clear assertion for their view to stand. They argue that the antecedent in the final sentence of Irenaeus' statement could be referring to the vision itself or to John. This could be the difference between Irenaeus saying that John's vision took place during the reign of Domitian or saying that John, who lived during the time of Domitian was seen? (Sproul 1998:143). Preterists feel that this supposed ambiguity has done enough to neutralise the chief witness to the late date. Preterists focus mainly on internal evidence to support their view, as we have already seen, the use of time texts and Neronic identification of the beast do not provide strong enough arguments for a first century fulfilment. Another piece of internal evidence is offered by Terry, which he classes as "a most weighty argument for the early date... the mention of the temple court and city in chapter 11" (Terry 1999:139).

Are these arguments really that substantial? Firstly, the list of early date advocates provided by Gentry doesn't actually support his view. True, they hold to a pre A.D. 70 date, but strictly preterism requires a pre A.D. 67 date, as this was the formal commencement of the Jewish war which Revelation is said to prophesy about. This is crucial as the scholars he lists such as A.T. Robertson, F.F. Bruce and Philip Schaff all hold to a date of A.D. 68-69 during the reign of Galba, Nero's successor. Very few would actually support the preterist's pre A.D. 67 date. As for the reinterpretation of the Irenaeus statement, in spite of its apparent clarity and lucidity, it is indeterminate and unnecessary. As Paher argues "by the rule of antecedents, the 'that' has to refer to the nearest noun which is the last word of the previous sentence, 'vision'" (Paher 2003:72). Even early date advocate (late A.D. 68) John A.T. Robertson accepts Irenaeus's statement as a clear reference to the vision itself. He says that the "translation has been disputed by a number of scholars, on the basis that he (John) was seen" Robertson concludes, "this is very dubious, one must assume that Irenaeus believed the Apocalypse to have come from c.95" (Robertson 1976:221). Irenaeus's testimony remains strong but, contra claims by Terry that the late date rests on "the sole testimony of Irenaeus" there are many other witnesses. Hitchcock in his PHD dissertation, largely a response to Gentry's, lines up the external witnesses side by side. The results are overwhelming. The late date has a solid line of support beginning in A.D. 180 with Irenaeus, through Victorinus, Eusebius, Jerome, Severus, Primasius, Andreas, and Venerable Bede (A.D.700). The first unambiguous reference to the early date is a one-line superscription in



two Syriac versions of the NT in A.D. 550 (Hitchcock 2005:74). Perhaps this is why preterists always argue that we must let internal evidence take precedence? Finally the other piece of internal evidence offered was the mention of the temple in chapter 11. Again this evidence is not convincing, a precedent is clearly set in the biblical text for this language by Ezekiel, “who recorded his vision of the new temple and city 14 years after the destruction of the physical one in 586bc” (Paheer 2003:199), the deduction that Revelation 11 necessarily implies that the Temple was still standing when John received his vision is assuming too much.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this paper we have surveyed three of the main arguments used to support preterism. We analysed the hermeneutical approach to the time texts in Revelation deducing that this is possibly the strongest leg of their position. However ultimately, we noted that to be completely consistent they are forced to contradict themselves regarding the strictly chronological interpretation of these time texts. We also offered some plausible alternative explanations from a futurist perspective. The Neronic identification for Revelation 13 was found to be insufficient due to questionable application of the Nero-*redivivus* myth. The number 666 was also discounted as evidence due to the uncertainty of the gematria and the inclusion of a title not indicated in the text. Finally the early date for Revelation was examined and identified as the Achilles heel of preterism. The early date as required by preterism, pre A.D.67 cannot find support from the majority of scholars and

has very little external evidence in its favour. The only arguments are internal ones from the text, which we examined in the first part of the paper and found them insufficient for concluding an early composition.

The implications of these findings mean that the preterist approach to Revelation is resting upon a rather precarious foundation. In fact, in order to be a plausible explanation the preterist must provide a number of more satisfactory responses to these issues. Ultimately, that fact that the entire system can stand or fall with the date of the book, which may never be completely proven, indicates that hermeneutically they are fighting a losing battle. Whilst this study has not examined all the arguments in favour of preterism it has attempted to examine a broad sample of their main evidences. Some topics for future exploration would be for preterists to deal with the weight of external evidence against an early date and also to work on a more complete harmonisation of all the events in Revelation 13 before claiming Neronian identification. For futurists, much work still needs to be done to explain the difficulties with the interpretation of the time texts and also to ensure that the message of the book is not rendered irrelevant to the original recipients.

In conclusion we have outlined and critiqued one of the major interpretive approaches to Revelation. We found that it is ultimately unable to provide enough evidence to support its foundational premises and for this reason we advocate holding an alternative approach.

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