



RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

'Eschatology' is the study of last things. Christians should never fear having their eschatological 'system' scrutinised by the plain teaching of the Bible. If you subscribe to the currently popular "Left Behind" system of eschatology, prepare to be challenged by Scripture and history. Moreover, prepare to gain a greater respect for the integrity of the Bible.

# APOCALYPSE THEN

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*A growing number of evangelicals, disturbed by cries of the end, are reviving an old view of Revelation that avoids date-setting.*



According to a recent Associated Press news report, when the year 2000 arrives computers throughout the world may be thrown into confusion. Many big computers at such computer-dependent institutions as insurance companies and banks track the year by using only the last two digits, rather than all four. Consequently, these computers will read the last two digits of 2000 as if they represent the year 1900. The problem is serious enough that a technical computer newsletter, titled "Tick, Tick, Tick," has been established to

deal with the potential problem.

Judging from popular prophetic imagination that frequently points to computer technology as a tool of the Beast, and in light of increased cries of the end with the approach of the year 2000, this could become a hot prophecy topic. Such an unfortunate and embarrassing computer programming glitch could easily be transformed by the fertile apocalyptic mind into one of the "signs of the times" betokening the end of history.

Apocalyptic populists have become increasingly bold of late. Edgar Whisnant's *Eighty-eight Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be in 1988* and Harold Camping's *1994?*, caused quite a furor among evangelicals in recent years (*Christianity Today*, June 20, 1994, pp. 46-47). And they are but two prominent examples of what is becoming increasingly common among evangelical prophecy enthusiasts.

With the looming of the year 2000, many Christians have developed apocalyptic fever. Apocalyptic works are beginning to crowd the shelves of Christian bookstores with titles such as: *Planet Earth—2000: Will Mankind Survive?*, *I Predict 2000*, *Prophecy 2000*, *Rushing to Armageddon*, and *The 90's: Decade of the Apocalypse*.

In Hal Lindsey's current best-seller, *Planet Earth—2000*, he mentions celebration for the year 2000 in plans for a "World Millennium Charity Ball" to be held at the Great Pyramid in Giza, Egypt, on December 31, 1999. Comments Lindsey: "Just

*"Fulfilled prophecy is being interpreted as if it were unfulfilled prophecy."*

Gary DeMar, author of *Last Days Madness*

for the record. I'm not planning to attend. In fact, looking at the state of the world today, I wouldn't make any long-term earthly plans."

## *The Revival of Preterism*

Yet, there is a growing number of Christians who believe that the closer we get to the year 2000, the farther we get from the events of Revelation. This interpretive position is known as "preterism." According to the Webster's New 20th Century Unabridged Dictionary, "preterist" means: "in theology, one who believes that the prophecies of the Apocalypse have already been fulfilled." Evangelical preterists maintain that many of the apocalyptic prophecies of the New Testament, including the Book of Revelation, are related to the destruction of Jerusalem. They still hold, though, to a future Second Advent, bodily resurrection of the dead, and Final Judgment. This view initially sounds strange to most modern evangelical prophecy enthusiasts, who are so familiar with the futuristic approach to Revelation.

Nevertheless, the preterist view of Revelation, which reached its zenith in the period spanning the 1600s through the 1800s, is experiencing a remarkable revival in our times. Many Christians are declaring "Apocalypse Then." Such evangelical scholars as R. C. Sproul of Ligonier Ministries and Greg L. Bahnsen of the Southern California Center for Christian Studies hold this view. Evangelical journals frequently defending this position include the American journal *American Vision*, edited by Gary DeMar; the English journal, *Christianity & Society*, edited by Stephen Perks; and the *German journal Symbiotica*, edited by Ruben Alvarado.

Supplementing this renewed interest in preterism are reprints of books from the 1800s defending the position, two examples being J. Stuart Russell's *The Parousia* and Milton Terry's *Biblical Apocalypics*. Books of more recent vintage are being produced, as well; included among these are J. Marcellus Kik's *The Eschatology of Victory*, DeMar's *Last Days Madness*, and my own *The Beast of Revelation*. In fact, Zondervan has also issued me a contract to write from this perspective as one of the contributors to a forthcoming book, titled *Three Views of the End of History*, under the editorship of Darrell Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary.

## *Questions Galore*

But now, why would anyone believe that the events of Revelation have already transpired? Surely not just to avoid the embarrassment of recent failed predictions. And how could the earth-shaking prophecies in Revelation find fulfillment in A.D. 70? Among surprised laymen these and whole host of related questions immediately spring to mind when the position is mentioned.

Preterists are convinced that a strong and biblically relevant case may be made for the past fulfillment of the terrifying judgment scenes of Revelation. Their fulfillment came in the covenantally catastrophic events associated with the Jewish War with Rome, formally engaged by Rome in the Spring of A.D. 67. This war, made famous by the writings of Flavius Josephus, resulted in the destruction of God's holy temple and the final cessation of the levitical system of worship three and one-half years later in August/September, A.D. 70 (cf. Rev. 11:2). Obviously, then, the consequences of the war were of tremendous redemptive historical moment.

The preterist case begins in the first few verses of Revelation. In these verses it seems that John himself informed his original recipients that the events contained within were to occur in their generation. Verses 1 and 3 in the first chapter of Revelation read: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants; things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John.... Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near."

And so that his readers not forget, John reminded them of the nearness of those dreaded events as he closes his work. Revelation 22:6 and 10 read: "Then he said to me, 'These words are faithful and true. And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show His servants the things which must shortly take place....' And he said to me, 'Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand.'"

Consequently, both the opening and closing remarks of John in Revelation seem to predispose the reader to understand the events as chronologically near in his day. That being the case, then it would be true that the closer we get to the year 2000, the farther we get from

the events of Revelation. The preterist finds such a conclusion difficult to escape, especially since John was writing to historical churches (Rev. 1: 4, 11) during a time of "tribulation" that he was enduring with them (Rev. 1:9; 2:9-10,13; 3:10). The Christians to whom John wrote were weathering the furious storm of Roman persecution that threatened the very existence of the faith. Furthermore, they were about to witness the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, places of prominence even for Christians (Acts 6:7; 8: 1; 15:2).

In fact, elsewhere in related apocalyptic passages of the New Testament the preterist finds further encouragement for his interpretive position. Of the "great tribulation," which is a topic for both John (Rev. 7:14) and Jesus (Matt. 24:21), Jesus informs His listeners: "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away until all these things are fulfilled" (Matt. 24:34). This may explain Peter's concern that his Pentecostal hearers save themselves from their "perverse generation" (Acts 2:41), which was about to erupt in "blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke" (Acts 2:19). And Paul's discouragement of marriage in 1 Corinthians 7:26-31, during the "present distress" while "the time is short." Other inspired writers seem to anticipate a looming judgment compatible with Revelation's (Heb. 10:25, 37; Jas. 5:8-9; 1 Pet. 4:5, 7; 1 Jn. 2:17, 18).

But objections persist. Two common foundational objections to the preterist position, particularly from among biblical scholars, are: (1) John's time statements speak of time as God perceives it, not man; and (2) John did not write Revelation until after the events of Revelation, that is, in about A.D. 95-96, rather than sometime between A.D. 65-69.

The preterist finds the "God's time" argument less than convincing. When Peter stated that "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet. 3:8), he expressly declared that he was making a theological statement about God. John did not; in fact, he was writing to individuals about things they must "keep" (Rev. 1:3) and events and judgments coming upon them (Rev. 2-3). Unlike Daniel (Dan. 12:9), John was not to "seal" the words of his prophecy—for now "the time is at hand" (Rev. 22: 10). Besides, the preterist asks, what words could John have used had he intended to speak of the

nearness of the events? He varied his terms and repeated them in such a way that seems to insure against misconception.

Neither is the preterist swayed by the arguments for a late date for Revelation. There are suggestive evidences within the book to date it in the mid- to late-60s of the first century. In fact, the evidence is persuasive enough that it convinced such notable scholars Moses Stuart, F. J. A. Hort, B. F. Westcott, and F. W. Farrar in the last century, and J. A. T. Robinson, R. A. Torrey, Albert A. Bell, and C. F. D. Moule in our own day.

Two leading indicators of the early date are: (1) The "temple" in the "holy city" is still standing as John writes, though it is being threatened with devastation (Rev. 11: 1-2). We know as a matter of historical fact that the Jewish temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, and has never been rebuilt. (2) The sixth "king" is presently ruling from the "seven mountains" and will do so until a king comes who will reign a "short time" (Rev. 17:9-10). The preterist takes this to be a clear enough allusion to Nero Caesar. According to the enumeration found in Josephus' *Antiquities* (18:2:2,6, 10) and Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Nero is Rome's sixth emperor, following Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, and Claudius. The next reigning emperor, Galba, reigned but six months, the shortest reigning emperor until that time.

## *Interpretive Problems*

But then additional questions explode into the debate: Who was the Beast? And how did he die and live again (Rev. 13)? Where was the blood flow to "the horses' bridles" (Rev. 14:20)? What about the hailstones "weighing one talent 100 pounds each" (Rev. 16:21)?

Of course, these and a great many other perplexing detail questions are generated if one adopts the preterist approach that proclaims "Apocalypse Then." But the same is true for any interpretive approach. The preterist would surely be presumptuous to claim that he had all the answers to the many detail questions of Revelation. This marvelous book is known throughout Christian history for its extreme difficulty. The noted church father Jerome lamented that it contained "as many words as mysteries." The great reformer John Calvin left Revelation out of his New Testament

commentaries.

But with the recent revival of interest in Josephus' writings, the preterist finds suggestive historical references quite supportive of his interpretive approach. Josephus' *Wars of the Jews* contains invaluable source materials written by one who was not only an eye-witness to the Jewish War, but a combatant on both sides of that destructive war: after his defeat at Jotapata, Josephus befriended the Roman general Vespasian and went with him in an effort to convince the Jews to surrender, a service that has rendered him a Benedict Arnold to the Jews.

Quick samples of the utility of Josephus' record to the preterist position are intriguing. Regarding the blood flow to the "horses' bridles," Josephus' comments on the battle scenes during the Jewish War are enlightening. At one point a naval battle produced a "lake all bloody, and full of dead bodies" (Wars 3:10:9). Later he reported that "the whole of the country through which they had fled was filled with slaughter, and Jordan could not be passed over, by reason of the dead bodies that were in it, but because the lake Asphaltitis was also full of dead bodies" (Wars 4-7:6). Surely such carnage and bloodshed are suggested by John's imagery.

The prophecy of the talent weight hailstones has found a similar fulfillment in the siege of Jerusalem, according to the preterist. Josephus states of the catapults of the Roman tenth legion: "the stones that were cast, were of the weight of a talent, and were carried two furlongs and further.... As for the Jews, they at first watched the coming of the stone, for it was a white color" (Wars 5:6:3). These stones not only had the weight required by John, but were the same color as hail.

But now what of the Beast, that most fearsome of Revelational images? Scholars as widely divergent as dispensationalist John Walvoord, anti-dispensationalist Philip Mauro, and critical scholar R. H. Charles agree that the Beast in Revelation has both a generic and a specific reference. Thus, he represents both a kingdom and an individual. That being the case, when we take into consideration the temporal indicators and the relevance factors, we may make a strong case for identifying him specifically as Nero (he is "a man," Rev. 13: 18) and generically as Rome (he has "seven heads" which are "seven kings," Rev. 17:10).

The Beast is associated with "seven mountains" (Rev. 17:9); Rome is known for its seven hills. He wages "war with the saints" (Rev. 13:7); Rome begins persecuting Christians in A.D. 64. But the Beast also has the "number of a man," which is 666 (Rev. 13:18); Nero's name, when spelled in first century Aramaic, adds up to this number. The Beast makes war with the saints for "forty-two months" (Rev. 13:5); Nero begins his persecution in November, A.D. 64, later executes Peter and Paul, then dies in June, A.D. 68, halting his persecution after forty-two months.

But what of the death of the Beast followed by his remarkable resurrection (Rev. 13:3)? Here not only Josephus, but also Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius have provided helpful historical data. Each of these reported that Rome erupted into civil war during the course of the Jewish War. At the outset of Rome's civil war Nero committed suicide, which destabilized the empire so greatly that Tacitus reported: "Many believed the end of the empire was at hand" (*Histories* 4:5:4) and "this was the condition of the Roman state in the year which was to be for Galba his last and for the state almost the end" (*Histories* 1: 1). Yet, according to Suetonius, to the surprise of the world, "the empire which for a long time had been unsettled and, as it were, drifting through the usurpation and violent death of three emperors, was at last taken in and given stability by the Flavian family" (*Vespasian* 1: 1). As Josephus commented: "So upon this confirmation of Vespasian's entire government, which was now settled, and upon the unexpected deliverance of the public affairs of the Romans from ruin" (Wars, 4-11:5). Thus, when the personal aspect of the Beast died in Nero, the generic Beast of the Roman Empire began collapsing to death. But the empire was finally revived before the destruction of Jerusalem was complete.

Though a minority position among evangelicals today, preterism has a plausibility that cannot be easily denied. Whether or not the view arises to a position of prominence in contemporary prophecy discussions remains to be seen. One thing is clear, though: preterists cannot be faulted with alarming evangelical Christianity with failed expectations of the end. Although they are concerned with the computer glitch associated with the year 2000.

# Crying Wolf

Historian Mark Noll serves us a warning: "At the very least, it would be well for those in our age who predict details and dates for the End to remember how many before them have misread the signs of the times."

As children we learned Aesop's fable of the "Shepherd Boy and the Wolf." In the end we learn that the sheep are the ones that are harmed by the shouts of "Wolf!" by the Shepherd Boy. In the same way the people of God—the sheep—are harmed by continual shouts of "the end is near!" God is looking for shepherds after His own heart, "who will feed" the flock "on knowledge and understanding" (Jer. 3:15), not on the latest newspaper headlines.

Day after day, a Shepherd Boy tended a flock of sheep in the hills above his village. One day, just to cause some excitement, the Shepherd Boy ran down from the hills shouting "Wolf! Wolf!"

The townsfolk came running with sticks to chase the Wolf away. All they found was the Shepherd Boy, who laughed at them for their pains.

Seeing how well his trick worked, the Shepherd Boy tried it again the next day. Again he ran down from the hills shouting, "Wolf!" Again the townsfolk

ran to his aid in vain.

But the day after, it happened that a Wolf really came. The Shepherd Boy, now truly alarmed, shouted, "Help! Come and help me! The Wolf is killing the sheep!"

But this time the townsfolk said, "He won't fool us again with that trick!" They paid no attention to his cries, and the Wolf destroyed the entire flock.

When the people saw what happened to their sheep, they were very angry. "There is no believing a liar," they said, "even when he speaks the truth!"

Of course, if you cry "last days" long enough, you just might be the one to get it right, but by then there might not be anyone listening. Preaching about the soon coming of Christ has long been used by Christian prophecy teachers as a way of pleading with the lost to commit themselves to Jesus Christ. Such a motivating device can backfire on even the most well-intentioned evangelist. What happens if a listener shouts out, "Preachers like you have been telling us for centuries that Jesus is coming soon. Why should we believe you now?" By crying wolf and being wrong each time, the church is perceived as unreliable. Skeptics of the Christian faith are likely to conclude that since these self-proclaimed prophets were wrong on the timing of Jesus' return when they seemed so certain (particularly of the nearness of the rapture, the rise of Antichrist, the Great Tribulation, and

Armageddon), then maybe they are wrong on other issues which they teach with equal certainty. *Maybe the entire Christian message is a sham.*

The New Testament does use the near and soon coming of Jesus in judgment as a way of spurring the church on to greater works. The near judgment spoken of in Scripture refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, not a distant future coming of Christ. Peter wrote, "The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer" (1 Peter 4:7). At hand for whom? If words mean anything, then Peter must have had his contemporary readers in mind. What end was he describing? In Luke's Gospel we read Jesus saying, "But keep on the alert at all times, praying in order that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:36). John says in his first epistle, "Children, it is the last hour, and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen; from this we know it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18).

The Bible is not a book that can be taken lightly. The integrity of the Bible is at stake if we dismiss these clearly worded statements of time. As students of the Bible, we are obligated to take God at His word, even when it contradicts what we've been taught by popular prophecy writers. — Gary DeMar

# Eschatological Pessimism

A vast majority of Christians have believed that things will get progressively worse in almost every area of life until Jesus returns with His angels. Premillennialists believe that He will establish an earthly, visible kingdom, with Christ in charge and bodily present. Amillennialists do not believe in any earthly visible kingdom prior to the final judgment. They believe that only the church and Christian schools and fami-

lies will visibly represent the kingdom on earth, and the world will fall increasingly under the domination of Satan. Both eschatologies teach the earthly defeat of Christ's church prior to His physical return in power.

One problem with such an outlook is that when the predictable defeats in life come, Christians have a theological incentive to shrug their shoulders, and say to themselves, "That's life. That's the way God prophesied it would be. Things are getting worse." They read the dreary headlines of the daily newspaper, and they think to themselves, "Jesus' Second Coming is just around the corner." The inner strength that people need to rebound from life's normal external

defeats is sapped by a theology that preaches inevitable earthly defeat for the church of Jesus Christ. People think to themselves: "If even God's holy church cannot triumph, then how can I expect to triumph?" Christians therefore become the psychological captives of newspaper-selling pessimistic headlines. They begin with a false assumption: the inevitable defeat in history of Christ's church by Satan's earthly forces, despite the fact that Satan was mortally wounded at Calvary. Satan is not "alive and well on Planet Earth." He is alive, but he is not well. To argue otherwise is to argue for the historical impotence and cultural irrelevance of Christ's work on Calvary. — Gary North

"One of the most important lessons any Christian reader of the Old Testament must learn in order to truly understand its message is its connection to the New Testament. Jesus himself said that **the whole Old Testament looked forward to his coming suffering and glorification** (Luke 24:25-27, 44-48), **but it is surprising how many ignore this crucial principle of interpretation.**" Tremper Longman III, author of *Making Sense of the Old Testament*