

Consistent Preterism And The Integrity Of Jesus

By: Kirk Wellum

One problem confronting Christians who take the Bible seriously is the accuracy of Jesus' predictions regarding his own parousia or coming in glory and power. As R.C.Sproul points out in the introduction of his book, "The Last Days According To Jesus," Albert Schweitzer was one of an important group of modern scholars who openly questioned the accuracy of Jesus' eschatological understanding. Schweitzer's quest for the 'historical Jesus' led him to re-discover a Jesus who believed the kingdom of God was about to appear, inaugurated by a catastrophic act of God, in his own lifetime. Unfortunately according to Schweitzer Jesus was sadly mistaken and died a disillusioned man.¹ This, however, is not the end of Schweitzer's story. Not only did the delay of the parousia pose problems for Jesus but also it necessitated a re-thinking on the part of the early church. The early church had to realign its thinking and adjust its teaching to account for what turned out to be a non-event. This, we are told, explains the movement from the expectation of an imminent return to a return that would be delayed and would only take place at some time in the unknown future. While subsequent generations of scholars have critiqued and in many cases rejected much of Schweitzer's theorizing, the problem of the timing of the parousia remains. At its best, preterism represents a noble attempt to defend Jesus against the charge of being mistaken in terms of the details of the coming of the kingdom of God and his relationship to it. Evangelical preterists understand that ascribing error(s) to Jesus is a very serious charge and they believe that preterism is the key to getting Jesus and the early church off the hook. At its worst, preterism involves a radical re-interpretation of key components of the Christian faith that borders on the bizarre and cultic. R.C.Sproul said something at the 1993 Covenant Eschatology Symposium in Mt.Dora, Florida, that has become something of a rallying cry for enthusiastic proponents of and converts to preterism: "...skeptical criticism of the Bible has become almost universal in the world. And people have attacked the credibility of Jesus. Maybe some church fathers made a mistake. Maybe our favorite theologians have made mistakes. I can abide with that. I can't abide with Jesus being a false prophet, because if I am to understand that Jesus is a false prophet, my faith is vain."² While I trust that all evangelical Christians would agree with Sproul's statement, I do not believe that preterism is the best or the most biblical way to counter the unbelieving attacks that are being made on the integrity of Jesus.

In terms of etymology, "preterism" has to do with the past. It is a system of biblical and prophetic interpretation that believes that most, if not all, of the eschatological events of the Bible have already been fulfilled. Preterism comes in a variety of forms. Moderate, partial, exegetical or orthodox preterists, as they like to call themselves, believe there was a coming or parousia of the Jesus Christ in A.D. 70

¹ R.C.Sproul, *The Last Days According To Jesus* (1998), p.21.

² R.C.Sproul quoted by Ed Stevens in the *Conclusion of Stevens' Response To Gentry* (<http://members.stratos.net/cshields/response/conclusion.htm>).

when he came in judgment on Jerusalem in what they believe was one manifestation of “the Day of the Lord.” Moderate preterists do not believe that the resurrection took place in A.D. 70, nor do they believe that Jesus’ coming in judgment on Israel and Jerusalem is his final coming at the end of the age, the final Day of Lord, or the final Day of Judgment. Full or consistent preterists, as they like to call themselves, or theological, radical or hyper-preterists, as they are identified by others even within the preterist camp, believe that all the eschatological events i.e. the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment and the Day of the Lord, took place in A.D. 70 when Jesus, through the instrumentality of the Romans, destroyed Jerusalem and its temple. To be fair, both groups try to establish their positions exegetically as can be seen by even a cursory look at their various publications and web pages. Both groups tend to believe their brand of preterism represents the best way to deal with the troublesome time elements present in many prophetic NT Scriptures. Hermeneutically, they make the time elements the key to interpreting prophetic passages of Scripture and biblical eschatology in general. The time elements are almost always interpreted in the most literal fashion even if this means they must figuratively or symbolically interpret and reinterpret many other important features of the text.

Personally I believe there is much to be said for moderate or partial preterism even though I do not believe that as a system it adequately appreciates some of the subtle nuances of NT prophecy and eschatology. Full or consistent preterism is not as benign. The idea that the great and glorious second coming of Jesus spoken about in the NT as “the blessed hope” has already taken place is an incredible suggestion to say the least. Even more unbelievable is the idea that the great resurrection of the dead has already taken place as has Judgment Day when Jesus in the person of Titus trashed Jerusalem. Consistent preterists also believe that life as we know it now will go on indefinitely, that sin may never be removed from human experience, that the “last days” refer to the “last days of the Jewish age,” that the apostle Paul believed in some kind of “spiritual resurrection” similar to heretics Hymenaeus and Philetus whom he handed over to Satan so they might be taught not to blaspheme (2Tim.2:17-18), and that Matthew 24 and almost the entire book of the Revelation is about the destruction of Jerusalem. These are astonishing assertions! It is one thing for the church to be constantly reforming as it has over the past two thousand years, it is another thing altogether to suggest that God’s people have been profoundly mistaken about so many key aspects of the Christian faith for so long. This is especially ironic since according to consistent preterism we have already entered into much of that which has traditionally been reserved for “glory.”

From my perspective, the basic problem with consistent preterism is its unrelenting consistency. It takes biblical passages that refer to the timing certain eschatological events and makes them the foundation of a system of prophetic interpretation that tends to see the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 everywhere. Consistent preterism does not allow the Scriptures to modify and adjust its assumptions and presuppositions. This results in the radical revision of a host biblical passages.

I do not believe we are forced to choose between the first century fulfillment of most, if not all, NT eschatological events and Jesus being a false prophet. That is a false dichotomy. It is not a matter of either taking the time elements literally or taking the passages that speak of the second coming of Jesus and the bodily resurrection literally. There is another way and a better way for the Christian believer to do justice to both sets of texts while at the same time maintaining and preserving the integrity of Jesus.

A full critique of the far-reaching assumptions and implications of consistent preterism is beyond the scope of this paper as it involves an examination of too many basic and well-established Christian doctrines. Fortunately, consistent preterism is so far removed from biblical as well as common sense reality that I do not believe it will ever gain widespread acceptance. While we should not allow it to consume too much precious time and energy analyzing it does help us gain a better appreciation of the truth as it is in Jesus whose great and glorious second coming will one day consummate his truly awesome eternal kingdom.

To this end I want us to consider consistent preterism in light of the flexibility inherent in the NT concept of the kingdom of heaven, the two-fold answer of Jesus to the question of his disciples in Matthew 24, and the plausibility of the traditional late first century date of Revelation.

The Flexibility Inherent In The NT Concept Of The Kingdom of Heaven

I want to start with the kingdom of heaven, as it is usually spoken about by Matthew, or the kingdom of God, as spoken about by Mark and Luke, because a right understanding of the kingdom will help us interpret three critical references found in the gospel of Matthew that both modern critics and modern disciples of Jesus have found extremely difficult and troubling. The texts are as follows:

- ❑ Mt 10:23 "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes."
- ❑ Mt 16:27-28 "For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."
- ❑ Mt 26:64 "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

In each of these texts Jesus speaks of himself coming as the Son of Man in such a way that some to whom he was speaking would personally see and experience him. But the "coming of the Son of Man" language immediately raises important questions. What exactly does Jesus mean when he talks

about *coming* before his disciples have finished going through the cities of Israel? What does he mean when he says that some of those who were standing there listening to him will not taste death before they see the Son of Man *coming* in his kingdom? What *coming* is Jesus referring to when he answers the question of the high priest under oath? The answer of unbelieving biblical critic is that Jesus is talking about his second coming at the end of the age, a coming which he believed was going to happen within his lifetime. The parousia did not happen which means Jesus was wrong at this point. But this will not do. Any answer that affirms error on the part of Jesus has never been acceptable to Christians because of Jesus' insistence that he is the way, the truth and the life. But if Jesus was not mistaken about the time of his coming, what was he talking about in the three examples under consideration?

Consistent preterists believe they have a ready answer. Jesus was talking about his coming in judgment on the Jewish nation in A.D. 70. This event took place within the lifespan of the people he was speaking to in all three instances. In fact, as far as I can see, they seem to believe that all references that appear to be referring to what historic Christianity has called "the second coming of Jesus," refer instead to the destruction of Jerusalem and the resurrection of the dead that they believe was connected with it. This was the time when God punished the Jewish people and leadership for their rejection of Messiah. It was also the time when the Christian church came into its own as the New Covenant people of God, when they came into the presence of God and into the complete possession of their kingdom inheritance.³

The problem with the consistent preterist interpretation of these texts is that it is too monolithic and rigid. It is not completely wrong however. There is an element of truth in what they are saying otherwise we would probably not be discussing it in this paper. I believe they are right when they identify the destruction of Jerusalem as "the coming" spoken about in Mt.10:23. Not because this is the only way to save Jesus from falsehood but because the context points in this direction and the concept of the Son of Man coming in the power of the kingdom is flexible enough to allow it. I also believe that the destruction of Jerusalem is not the best explanation of the other two texts for the very same reasons: the individual contexts make it highly unlikely and the NT concept of the kingdom of heaven and the coming of the Son of Man that is related to it is much larger than the destruction of Jerusalem.

In Matthew's gospel we first encounter "the kingdom of heaven" as something that is said to be "near." Both John the Baptist (Mt.3:2) and Jesus (Mt.4:17) call upon men to repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. The announcement of the nearness of the kingdom created a lot of excitement because it was based on the OT expectation that one day God would visit the world and establish justice, crush all opposition, and eventually renew the entire universe. In the OT "the kingdom" is described in many different ways. It was bound up with the fulfillment of the promises made to David's Son, it would be the

³ Ed Stevens' response to Gentry – *The Effects of the Resurrection* p.2.
(http://members.stratos.net/cshields/response/effects_of_the_resurrection.htm).

Day of the Lord, it would result in a new heavens and a new earth, it will be a time when Israel will be regathered and when the Lord himself would inaugurate a new and better covenant with his chosen people (2Sam.7:13-14; Is.1:24-28; 9:6-7; 11:1-10; 64-66; Jer.23:5-6; 31:31-34; Ezk.37:24; Dn.2:44; 7:13-14).⁴ In both the Old and New Testaments the kingdom is a “dynamic concept” that is best understood as “the reign of God.” The kingdom of God is the reign of God in and through his Son. It is not to be understood in merely a spiritual way. It is not restricted to the heavenly realms. After his resurrection Jesus can say that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him (Mt.28:18) and elsewhere we are told that Jesus will reign until all enemies have been put under his feet (1Cor.15:25). It was this kingdom that is said to be near when John the Baptist came preaching in advance of Jesus. Matthew links John’s announcement of kingdom nearness to Is.40:3, a passage which defines his role as the forerunner of Jesus. Jesus’ announcement of the same nearness is linked to Is.9:1-2 as the beginning of the fulfillment of ancient promises made to those living in darkness and in the land of the shadow of death. This is not accidental or merely stylistic. While the message is the same (nearness) there is advancement between John and Jesus. With Jesus the kingdom is so near that it has “dawned.” The Messiah, whom the Jews thought of as “the coming one” (Mt.11:3), has arrived. What is strongly suggested by the combination of Mt.4:17 and Is.9:1-2 is made explicit in Mt.12:28 when Jesus explains to the religious leaders of his day that his power to drive out demons by the Spirit of God is proof positive that the kingdom of God *has come* upon them. The kingdom is no longer “near” in some ambiguous way, it has “arrived” in the sense that Jesus has come as the Messianic King. Jesus, who was born a King (Mt.2:2), has come in the power and authority of God. This explains his preaching and teaching and his miraculous powers (Mt.12:28). But this is not all. Before we get to the end of Matthew’s gospel we learn that Jesus must be rejected, suffer, die and be raised from the dead (Mt.16:21; 20:17-19, 28) as part of his coming to establish the saving reign of God on earth. This is what I mean by *flexibility*. He is born a king, the kingdom is near, even dawning as he begins his ministry, it has arrived in one sense as he goes about his work, and yet it is even further established when he dies on the cross and rises from the dead on the third day. But there is more. As the resurrected Lord who possesses all authority in heaven and on earth there is another sense in which he comes and enters into his kingdom at the end of this age (i.e. the Messianic Age), when he comes in his full glory as the uncontested Champion of champions and the Judge of all mankind having defeated all foes including sin, death and Satan (Mt.24:30; 25:31).

The flexibility of the concept of the kingdom of heaven/God is something that must be kept in mind when trying to interpret passages like Mt.10:23; 16:28 and 26:64. As I have already said the kingdom is flexible enough to allow the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 to be the most likely fulfillment of Mt.10:23 and the “coming of the Son of Man” of which it speaks. The context of Mt.10:23 involves persecution and trouble within the confines of Israel. Jesus’ disciples will have many troubles as they

⁴ D.A.Carson, *Matthew* (1984), pp.99-100. I am indebted to Carson for his wonderful discussion of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew’s gospel which underlies my first major criticism of preterism.

proclaim the message of the kingdom. They will be handed over to local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of Jesus they will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. When they are persecuted in one Jewish city they are to flee to another. There is a sense of urgency because judgment is soon going to fall on Israel because of their failure to recognize and receive Jesus. They must hurry because they will not finish preaching in all the cities of Israel before Jesus the Son of Man comes in judgment. The destruction of Jerusalem that Jesus warned about in Mt.23 will destroy the temple cultus that has already been declared obsolete by God (Mt.27:51). D.A.Carson: "Against this background the coming of the Son of Man in v.23 marks that stage in the coming of the kingdom in which the judgment repeatedly foretold falls on the Jews. With it the temple cultus disappears, and the new wine necessarily takes to new wineskins (9:16-17). The age of the kingdom comes into its own, precisely because so many of the structured foreshadowings of the OT, bound up with the cultus and the nation, now disappear. The Son of Man comes."⁵

The destruction of Jerusalem is not the best explanation of "the coming of the Son of Man" in Mt.16:27-28. The context is different and the concept of the kingdom of God and the coming of the Son of Man is broader than the destruction of Jerusalem and should not be restricted to it. In the verses leading up to Mt.16:28 the disciples of Jesus are being encouraged to sacrifice everything for the sake of the kingdom. If they try to preserve their lives they will lose them, but if they are willing to lose their lives in the service of Jesus, they will gain everything in the end. Carson has identified an important chiasmic structure in vs.24-28 that has at the peak of this structural pyramid the central weighing of values in vs.26. The disciples are being exhorted to look at life in light of the parousia of Jesus when he will reward each person for what he has done (vs.25 and 27). The challenge to deny themselves, take up the cross and follow Jesus in the present (vs.24) is then structurally linked to the promise of witnessing a present manifestation of the kingdom power in the immediate future (v.28).⁶

Jesus' reference to "seeing the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" has been interpreted in different ways. Many have gone with the suggestion that Jesus is talking about his Transfiguration, which is the subject of the first thirteen verses of the very next chapter (Mt.17). But the language seems too grandiose for an event that will take place only six days later. Furthermore, it is not at all clear how the Transfiguration is a "coming of the Son of Man in his kingdom." Others believe that Jesus is speaking about his Resurrection or Pentecost. But like his Transfiguration neither event is far enough away to justify "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." Then there are those who put this verse in the same category as Mt.10:23 and suggest that Jesus is speaking once again about the destruction of Jerusalem. This time however the context is not the same. There is no mention of cities of Israel or synagogue persecutions. And in spite of

⁵ Ibid., p.252.

⁶ Ibid., p.382.

the assertions of consistent preterism the coming of the Son of Man in his Father's glory with his angels in vs.27 is best understood as a reference to the coming of Christ at the end of the Messianic or Gospel Age (not the Jewish Age) when he comes as the appointed Judge and rewards each person (not just each Jewish person) according to what they have done. In these verses Jesus is talking about the demands of basic Christian discipleship during the period of time between his advents. In this context he is encouraging his disciples by telling them that they will not have to wait until the final parousia to see that their sacrifices are worth it. Before they leave this mortal plain some of them will see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. This was particularly important to the disciples because they were still trying to come to grips with Jesus' predictions of rejection, death and resurrection (v.21), which they did not understand at this point and could not assimilate. When we look at Mt.24 we will see that Jesus knows far more than his disciples about what lies ahead in the future. For instance, he knows that there will be a lengthy delay between the coming of his kingdom that his disciples will see during their lifetimes and his great and glorious final return as the Son of Man at the End. In light of this data it is best to take Mt.16:28 as a general reference to various manifestations of kingdom power including the Resurrection, the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, and the rapid expansion and growth of the church in an environment that was hostile to the gospel.⁷ Each of these would have bolstered the faith of the disciples.

In Mt.26:64, Jesus is on trial before the high priest who has commanded him under oath to tell the court if he is the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus affirms that he is and then tells the high priest and those present that in the future they will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven. The phrase *ap'arti* ("in the future," NIV) literally means, "from now on."⁸ This rules out the final coming of Lord as the fulfillment because obviously the high priest and other officials have died long ago. Some have suggested that Jesus was talking about his Resurrection but this was not something that was witnessed by the leaders to whom he was speaking. Consistent preterists see yet another reference to the destruction of Jerusalem but this event which was still some forty years away does not fit "from now on" in any literal sense. It is very unlikely that Caiaphas who was appointed high priest in A.D.18 before being removed from office along with Pontius Pilate in A.D. 36 was still alive when Jerusalem's destruction took place in 70 A.D. What Jesus seems to be saying is that this is the last time these men will see him as he stands before them on that occasion. From their courtroom he will go to the cross where he will inaugurate the New Covenant and lay the foundation of his kingdom. This effectively means that from now on they will see him as he is: the Messianic King and sovereign Judge.⁹

The NT "kingdom of heaven" and closely related "coming of the Son of Man" are flexible concepts. Context must determine what Jesus is talking about in a given place. The destruction of Jerusalem can be an expression of the reign of Messiah and can also be spoken of as a coming of the

⁷ Ibid., p.382.

⁸ Ibid., p.555.

Son of Man (Mt.10:23). But it is by no means the greatest and final expression of the kingdom of God nor is it the ultimate coming of the Son of Man. It is not even the best interpretation of passages where the final parousia is not directly in view (Mt.16:28;26:64). Consistent preterism with its over-interpretation of many passages may appear to solve some of the timing issues. But along the way consistent preterism blurs key distinctions and often fails to appreciate the subtle yet important nuances of the larger history of redemption and the true riches of the gospel. One important passage of Scripture that has been almost completely “gutted” by the reductionistic approach of consistent preterism is Mt.24.

The Two-Fold Answer Of Jesus To The Question Of The Disciples In Matthew 24

Consistent preterists believe Mt.24 is about the destruction of Jerusalem and that is all its about. They take this unusual position because they believe that the “coming of the Son of Man” which has traditionally been understood to refer to the final, visible return of the Lord Jesus to earth is instead Christ’s coming in judgment on the Jewish nation. As a result they start to see the destruction of Jerusalem everywhere (cf. Mt.13:40-41; 16:27; 25:31; Ac.1:11; 1Co.11:26; 15:52; 16:22; 1Th.4:14-17; 2Th.1:7; 2:1-8; 2Pet.3:10-12 and Rev.1:7). Because they equate the destruction of Jerusalem with the second coming of the Lord means that the events of A.D. 70 take on an amazing new importance never before recognized by historic Christianity. Consistent preterists see A.D. 70 as the end of the Jewish Age and the establishment of the new heavens and earth. Passages like 1Co.15 that promise the believer ultimate victory over death have been fulfilled! So too have passages like Ro.8:18-24! They believe that this was the time when the creation was liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. The transitional 40 year “millennium” (AD 30-70) which they refer to as the “last days” has past. During this time believers only had the first-fruits of the Spirit and they groaned inwardly as they eagerly awaited their adoption as sons. But that time is past. Christians have been living in the consummation for almost two thousand years. We are not to celebrate the Lord’s Supper as it was explained in the NT to those still living in the time of transition. They were to remember the Lord’s death till he comes. But he has come! Now the Lord’s Supper is a “victory celebration, the Messianic banquet, the wedding feast, the eschatological supper – in His presence, at His table, in the kingdom not a solemn memorial.” Since A.D. 70 we are living in “the complete fullness of the kingdom inheritance.”¹⁰

Some consistent preterists also believe that the coming of the Lord in the destruction of Jerusalem also brought to completion the high priestly work of Jesus Christ. Although Jesus said that his work was finished when he died on the cross, and although he told the repentant thief that he would be with him in paradise that day, consistent preterists do not believe that OT believers and those who died

⁹ Ibid., p.555.

¹⁰ Stevens’ Response to Gentry – *The Effects of the Resurrection* p.2.

during their millennium had access to the presence of God. They had to wait in the outer courts of the heavenly temple and were not allowed into the presence of God until Christ finished his Yom Kippur duties inside the heavenly Holy of Holies. Ed Stevens puts it like this: “When he completed that atonement, he came back out and ‘appeared a second time’ to the anxiously awaiting saints gathered in heaven’s outer temple courts (cf. Rev.6:9ff; 7:9-17) at the foot of Mt Zion (cf. Heb.12:18-29). Christ opened the way for us, and at AD 70 he gathered the saints and brought them back into God’s fellowship and presence for the first time since Adam and Eve lost it in the Garden. Paradise Restored! All God’s people can be in the Holy of Holies now. There is no more separation. However, this can *only* be the case if the High Priest has ‘appeared the second time’ from the Holy of Holies. If Christ has not yet returned to escort his waiting saints into his Father’s presence, then we are still not in his presence, and the ‘salvation which was ready to be revealed’ in the ‘last time’ in connection with the High Priest’s return, is still in ‘limbo’ (cf. Heb.9:28; 1Pet.1:3-7).”¹¹

If you ask how this could be, you will be told that it really happened even though you cannot see it with your physical eyes. The coming of Jesus in A.D. 70 took place in the spiritual realm. So too did the resurrection of the dead in a way that is absolutely beyond the realm of empirical verification. It was a spiritual resurrection, which means the dead left the shell of their physical bodies behind and ascended into the presence of God with new non-physical resurrection bodies. If you wonder why there is still sin and sickness and death in the “new heavens and earth” you are told that Christ has conquered spiritual death and that is really all that matters. A new spiritual body has been prepared for you when you die and you will go to be with God while life on earth goes on and on and in true theonomic postmillennial fashion the kingdom of Christ continues to grow and expand. If, after all this, you are still bitterly disappointed with this allegedly biblical vision of the new heavens and earth the most likely diagnosis is that you are far too materialistic and too much of a futurist and you need to readjust your thinking and get with the program!

This raises an interesting question: who would have thought that equating the destruction of Jerusalem with the final coming of the Lord would result in such a mishmash of uncontrolled and ultimately unbelievable exegesis? Answer: this is what you get when you fail to listen to Jesus in Mt.24 when he clearly teaches his disciples that there will be a substantial delay between the destruction of Jerusalem and his ultimate parousia. Almost all evangelical Christians, except for consistent preterists, agree that there will be delay. But there is little agreement about how to understand what Jesus is saying. At the center of this controversy is Mt.24:34 “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” Here is one of the most notoriously difficult time-frame reference passages in the Bible. Everyone has to deal with it. As we might guess by now, those who do not hold a high view of the Scriptures believe that Jesus expected the parousia to happen in the first century and he was mistaken. Consistent preterists also believe that Jesus expected the parousia to

¹¹ Ibid., p.2.

happen in the first century and it did when he came in judgment on Jerusalem. This gets Jesus off the hook in Mt.24 but it has far reaching consequences as we have already seen. The consistent preterist approach solves one problem while at the same time it creates all sorts of other problems. Others have taken a variety of approaches.

In my opinion there are two approaches that deserve further examination, both of which recognize that the destruction of Jerusalem is part of the puzzle but by no means the entire solution. It is the view put forward most recently by J.M.Kik and R.T.France who argue that Mt.24 answers two questions: 1) when will Jerusalem be destroyed and 2) what will be the sign of Jesus' coming and of the end of the age. The first half of Mt.24 to the end of vs.35 answers the first question, the last half of the chapter (vs.36-51) answers the second. One of the most attractive features of this view is that it is nice and neat. There is no flipping back and forth between first century events and the future, no need to talk about multiple fulfillments or "prophetic foreshortening," and there is no pressure to stretch the meaning of "this generation" to explain the text. According to this interpretation, Mt.24:34, with its clear time element applies to the destruction of Jerusalem. Mt.24:36 in which Jesus disavows knowledge of the timing of "that day" refers to his final parousia. In my mind, the major problem with this interpretation is the way it handles vs.29-31.

"Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other."

This interpretation requires these words to be applied to the destruction of Jerusalem instead of the final parousia of Jesus. Although this is a possibility based on the use of similar symbolic and prophetic language in Is.13:10 and 34:4 to describe God's judgment on Babylon and the nations, it is not the most natural way to understand this particular combination of elements. The combination of the coming of the Son of Man, clouds, power, great glory, and angels is found in a variety of NT passages that most Christians from the earliest times have understood to refer to the future parousia of Jesus (cf. 13:40-41; 16:27; 25:31; 1Co.11:26; 15:52; 16:22; 1Th.4:14-17; 2Th.1:7; 2:1-8; 2Pe.3:10-12; Rev.1:7).¹² Furthermore, I think a case can be made for a literal fulfillment of Is.13:10 and 34:4 when God at the end of this age comes in judgment on this world, Babylon and the nations, in the person of his Son. Carson believes that there is an allusion to Zech.12:10-12, which is used in other places in the NT in connection

¹² Carson, *Matthew*, p.493.

with the parousia of the Lord and the mourning not of the Jews but the nations.¹³ But even more telling is what Carson feels is a dubious connection between the destruction of Jerusalem, the Gentile mission and Dn.7:14.¹⁴ If the destruction of Jerusalem is the “coming of the Son of Man” then the text suggests a connection between the fall of the city and accelerated Gentile evangelism (the angels being “gospel messengers”). But there is no evidence that the fall of Jerusalem gave new impetus to the Gentile mission. It was well underway long before Jerusalem’s destruction and continued to advance afterwards. With regard to Dn.7:14, it speaks of someone like a Son of Man who approaches the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He is given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. It is very difficult to see how first century Christians would connect Dn.7 and the Son of Man who breaks the power of pagan empires with the destruction of Jerusalem by a pagan Roman emperor! As Carson says, it is very difficult to see how first century Christians saw the sacking of Jerusalem as their “redemption” (Lk.21:28).¹⁵ The destruction of Jerusalem was a great tragedy. It is hard to believe that it did not touch the hearts of Christians as it did the heart of their Lord who wept over it.

By far the best interpretation of Mt.24 that I have come across is that put forward by D.A.Carson.¹⁶ Like Kik and France, he argues that Jesus is giving a two-fold answer to the question of his disciples. It is very important to see that this does not mean the disciples understood that there would be a lengthy delay between the destruction of Jerusalem and his coming and the end of the age, when they asked the question. In the gospels, including Matthew, the disciples are consistently pictured as men who had a very difficult time synthesizing all that Jesus said to them. It was not until after his resurrection and the coming of the Spirit that they really understood much of what he was talking about. It is quite likely that in their minds the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming of Jesus and the end of the age were simultaneous events. It would have been almost impossible for them to imagine an age without the temple, as suggested by their fascination with its massive stones and magnificent buildings in Mk.13:1. But they were wrong. The destruction of Jerusalem and the return of Jesus and the end of the age were not going to happen at the same time and that is what Jesus proceeds to explain to them in Mt.24.

Carson’s interpretation differs from the likes of Kik and France in regard to the division of the text. He does not believe it can be simply divided in half at vs.36 and in this way neatly attach v.34 to the destruction of Jerusalem. He argues that Jesus is answering the disciples’ question in such a way as to communicate to them that there is going to be a lengthy delay before the End. Jesus does this by telling them that the period of time prior to his advent will be characterized by a number of things. There will be

¹³ Ibid., p.493.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.493.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.493.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp.495-510

deceivers who come in his name claiming to be the Christ and they will deceive many. There will be wars and rumors of wars, but they are not to be alarmed because the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places but all these are but the beginning of “birth pains” (a phrase with an OT background cf. Is.13:7; 26:17; Jer.4:31; 6:24; Mic.4:9-10).¹⁷ These are the birth pains of the Messianic Age. This is not to suggest that the Messianic Age is fully future. As we have already seen it has drawn near and actually dawned and in this way “come” in some sense with the coming and ministry of Jesus. Before this gospel closes it will be fully inaugurated when he dies on the cross and rises from the dead. But as we have already seen there is another sense in which it is still to come in its final consummated form. Jesus is telling his disciples and those of us who have ears to hear that between the inauguration and the consummation of the Messianic Age, or the kingdom of heaven, there will be birth pains. During this time there will be persecution, many will turn away from the faith and betray and hate each other and many false prophets will appear and deceive many. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And in addition to all this, this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (vs.4-14). All of these characteristics were experienced by those living in the first century, and all of these things will continue to be experienced by us until Jesus comes again.

Verse 15 marks a narrowing of focus. “So” does not introduce something temporally new. In vs.15-21 Jesus is simply zeroing in on one particular thing that is going to happen at the beginning of the interadvental period, something he has already mentioned in v.2 when he provoked his disciple’s question. Carson speaks of it as one particularly “sharp birth pain.”¹⁸ It is the destruction of Jerusalem. Many believe that the tribulation connected with the destruction of Jerusalem prophesies of another time of tribulation and destruction to come but Carson rejects this idea because of the very specific Jewish terminology and the limited geographical references in vs.15-21. This is the destruction of Jerusalem with its associated well-documented horrors. These verses warn those living in the first century in that part of the world to get out of the city and flee for their lives because this will be a time of great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equaled again.

What comes next is critical. Verse 22 is often read with the preceding section (vs.15-21). But Carson believes that the “those days” of v.22 does not refer to the destruction of Jerusalem and the great distress associated with it but to the general period of distress introduced back in vs.4-15 of which the destruction of Jerusalem spoken of in vs.15-21 is only one part.¹⁹ This is supported contextually by the phrase “no one” (literally “all flesh”) which usually refers to all mankind not just the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Similarly the word “elect” most naturally refers to all true believers (cf. Mt.22:14; 24:22, 24,

¹⁷ Ibid., p.498.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.499.

31). The verses which follow (vs.23-28) return to characteristics already mentioned in the opening section and not only show that false prophecy and deception are major problems during this period of time but the double reference forms a thematic inclusio. Jesus does not want his disciples to be lead astray by premature announcements of his coming or by reinterpretations of his coming that are not empirically verifiable. When he comes everyone will know it. It will be as visible and unmistakable as lightning that comes from the east and is visible in the west. Just as a vulture does not miss dead flesh so the final coming of the Son of Man will not require detailed exegesis or argumentation.

“Immediately after the distress of those days,” in vs.29 refers to the “distress” (thlipsis) of the period of the birth pains, the entire interadvental period, and picks up the same word in v.9 and v.22. The “distress of those days” is not the time of “great distress” (thlipsis megalē) spoken about in vs.15-21 in connection with Jerusalem.²⁰ When this extended period of time has run its course there will be cosmic upheavals in the universe. This may be figurative language but I tend to agree with Carson that it may well come to pass literally because this is the great, final and truly ultimate cosmic upheaval. At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. This is not simply the sign which is the Son of Man, nor should it be understood as the sign that the Son of Man is ruling in heaven, or something like that. Carson following T.F.Glasson argues that the combination of “sign” in v.30 and “trumpet” in v.31 point in a different direction. In both pagan Greek literature and in the LXX “sign” refers to an “ensign or standard” and “trumpet” is commonly associated with the eschatological gathering of God’s people (cf. Is.11:12; 18:3; 27:13; 49:22; Jer.4:21; 6:1; 51:27).²¹ Thus when Jesus speaks of “the sign of the Son of Man appearing in the sky,” he is talking about the unfurling of his banner, as he displays his glory as the King of kings and Lord of lords. All the nations of the earth mourn, not merely the tribes of the land of Israel, because all have rebelled against God and persecuted his people (v.9). They will mourn, but not with remorse as David and the house of Judah in Zech.12, but in despair, when they see King Jesus coming on the clouds in fulfillment of Dan.7:14. At the beginning of Matthew’s gospel (1:23) we are taken back to Is.7:14 and the prophecy that the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel – which means, “God with us.” Now we are given a vision of Jesus, the exalted Immanuel, coming in glory and power in a way that will be absolutely breathtaking and unmistakable. “His angels” are not Christian missionaries going out into the world to preach the gospel. They are “real” angels and the gathering is the great eschatological gathering God’s elect from the farthest reaches of the universe. They sound trumpets because they are finally participating in the gathering to end all gatherings.

In verse 32 Jesus summarizes what he has been saying. He directs their attention to a fig tree and reminds them that as soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, they know that summer is near. In the same way, when they see all these things, i.e. all of the things that are going to characterize

¹⁹ Ibid., p.502.

²⁰ Ibid., p.504.

the extended period of time prior to his coming, including the destruction of Jerusalem, they will know that it, i.e. his actual coming, is near, right at the door. Now we understand what Jesus means by “imminent” and we need to listen to him no matter what Albert Schweitzer or anyone else says. When Jesus says that his coming “is near, right at the door,” he means that it is the next great event in the unfolding drama of salvation.²² “Near” does not mean that “his coming” had to take place in the first century. It means that it is next and it will take place immediately after the distress of “those days” as determined by the will of his Father. When Jesus says that “this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened” (v.34) he knows exactly what he is talking about. That generation did not pass away until it experienced all of the characteristics of the period of birth pains including the destruction of Jerusalem. There is no need to re-assign “his coming” spoken about in vs.29-31 to anything other than his final coming to the earth that believers have been waiting for since he ascended in Ac.1:9-11. Nor is there any reason to doubt his veracity as God’s Greatest and Final Prophet. “All these things,” in v.34 are clearly differentiated from “that day or hour” in v.36. “That day” is known only to the Father and since “with the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day” (2Pet.3:8) we are wise to keep watch just as Jesus told us to in the rest of the Olivet Discourse (Mt.24:37-25:46) and not allow ourselves to grow restless and impatient. Any interpretation of Mt.24 that fails to see that Jesus was both answering his disciples’ questions while at the same time correcting their blended eschatological expectations is doomed to repeat their errors and misunderstand what Jesus is really saying . We do not need to worry about Jesus being a false prophet, we need to worry about our false interpretations of his Word.

The Plausibility Of The Traditional Late First Century Date Of Revelation

When it comes to the book of Revelation both consistent and partial preterists believe that like the Olivet Discourse it is primarily about the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Some even suggest that this is the apostle John’s version of that discourse which he did not include in his gospel. All of this is fine until it is discovered that traditionally most, but by no means all scholars, believe that John wrote Revelation toward the end of the first century between A.D. 90 and 95 during the reign of Domitian. If this date is correct the preterist interpretation of Revelation is highly unlikely to say the least. R.C.Sproul confirms this: “If the book was written in the final decade of the first century (the traditional view), then its prophecies probably do not concern the destruction of Jerusalem, an event that would have already taken place”... “the major objection to this position, however, regards the dating of Revelation. If the book was written after A.D. 70, then its contents manifestly do not refer to the event surrounding the fall of Jerusalem – unless the book is a wholesale fraud, having been composed after the predicted events had already occurred”... “On the other hand, if Revelation was written before A.D.70, then a case could be made that it describes chiefly those events leading up to Jerusalem’s fall. The when and why questions of

²¹ Ibid., p.505.

²² Ibid., p.507.

the Apocalypse are inseparably bound together”... the burden for preterists then is to demonstrate that Revelation was written *before* A.D. 70.”²³

This puts the preterist in an interesting position. His case depends on an early date. If his dating of the book is wrong his whole interpretation is wrong. The date of Revelation is something that we will never know for sure until we get to glory and ask John himself. My own understanding of Revelation is that it is a prophecy that describes the ultimate triumph of God and of his Christ in history and real space and time. My interpretation of the book, whether good or bad, does not depend on whether Revelation was written in the sixties during the reign of Nero or in the nineties during the reign of Domitian. I think this is important because it means my interpretation does not rest on extra-biblical data that no one has access to. Any interpretation that rests on unknown extra-biblical data as heavily as the preterism does should be regarded with suspicion. Such a reliance tends to lead interpreters away from the well-established principle of *sola Scriptura* that insists that in the end we must compare Scripture with Scripture if we are to rightly divide the Word. I believe the preterist dependence on an early date will inevitably cause them to see things in the text that are not really there. Since God has not seen fit to tell us exactly when the book was written no interpretation should be as time sensitive as preterism is.

With this in mind I want to argue for the *plausibility* of the traditional late first century date of Revelation. I am using the word “plausible” because that is all that is necessary to cast grave doubts on the preterist interpretation. On the other hand, they must destroy a late first century date and establish beyond a reasonable doubt an earlier date prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. My point is that while there is some evidence for both dates preterists do not possess the kind of proof necessary to establish their position.

The traditional date of Revelation rests on a statement of Irenaeus, the condition of the churches as described in Revelation, and the practice of emperor worship. Irenaeus’ (A.D. 130-202) statement is significant as he was in a position to have direct knowledge of the author because he came from Smyrna, one of the churches addressed in Revelation (1:11; 3:1-6) and he claims to have heard Polycarp, who was personally acquainted with the apostle John. Irenaeus’ statement is preserved in the writings of Eusebius and when translated into English reads: “We will not, however, incur the risk of pronouncing positively as to the name of the Antichrist; for if it were necessary that his name should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been announced by him who beheld the apocalyptic vision. For that was seen no (sic) very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian’s reign.”²⁴ This seems plain enough although there is always the possibility that Irenaeus was wrong. However, some preterists most notably, Robert J. Gentry Jr., in his book *Before Jerusalem Fell* have

²³ Sproul, *The Last Days According To Jesus*, (pp.132 & 140).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.142.

argued that Irenaeus did not say that the book of Revelation was written toward the end of Domitian's reign only that John was seen at that time.²⁵ Gentry, of course, has to find a way around what seems to be the natural meaning of Irenaeus' words to sustain his moderate preterism. Is he right or wrong? Who knows! All I know is that he has certainly not proven his point to the degree his position requires.

In terms of the condition of the churches as described in Rev.2-3 the various situations described seem to suit the nineties more than the sixties. Spiritual decay and stagnation is present in Ephesus a church in which Paul may have ministered up until A.D. 64. There is some evidence that the church in Smyrna may not have even existed until A.D. 60-64 and there was an earthquake that destroyed Laodicea in A.D. 60-61 which makes it hard to imagine that they were as wealthy and as smug as they appear to be in Rev.3:14-18. While it is entirely possible that someone like Nero may have insisted on being worshiped as emperor of Rome there is no solid evidence that he made his own worship a requirement. Such is not the case with Domitian who demanded that he be addressed as "lord and god" apparently as a test of loyalty. This may have lead to Christians seeking refuge in Jewish synagogues to avoid such a test and that may explain the palpable conflict between Jews and Christians that appears in the letters to the seven churches. Revelation is full of evidence that Christians are suffering not only in Rome but beyond (1:9; 2:13; 3:10; 6:9; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4) and there is also plenty of evidence that emperor worship had become an issue (13:4, 15-16; 14:9-11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). This internal evidence combined with what is known about the condition of the churches points to a later date during the reign of Domitian as the most plausible explanation.²⁶

The early dating of Revelation has three things in its favor. It seems to provide a straightforward explanation as to why the temple is mentioned in 11:1-2, the identity of the seven kings in 17:9-11 and who is the mysterious beast whose number is 666 in 13:18. However, none of these is decisive. Just because John saw a temple that he was told to measure does not mean that the actual temple was standing in Jerusalem prior to its destruction. John was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day and in that sublime condition he saw and experienced many things that while related to things on earth go far beyond them.

The seven kings may represent emperors of Rome in keeping with an allusion to Rome in 17:9. Verse 10 says that "five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while." If we start with Julius Caesar, Nero is the sixth king, the king who is when Revelation is being written, and he was followed by Galba who reigned only a short while. But it is not clear whether we should start with Julius Caesar who was the first to claim imperial rights, or with Augustus who was the first of the Roman emperors. Then there were the three emperors (Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian) who battled to occupy the top spot after the death of Nero. And how do we know that Rev.17

²⁵ Ibid., p.143.

²⁶ D.A.Carson; Douglas J. Moo; Leon Morris, *An Introduction To The New Testament*, (1992) pp.473-476.

is even referring to emperors at all, maybe he is taking about future kings who resemble in various ways those who held the reigns of political power in John's day. None of this is decisive.

Many preterists believe that "the beast" of Rev. 13:18 was Nero. How is this possible? R.C. Sproul explains: 'In the ancient world alphabets often did double duty as a system of numbering. We are aware that Roman letters such as X, C, M, and L also functioned as numbers. Gentry notes that numerical 'cryptograms' were fairly common in antiquity... 'any given name could be reduced to its numerical equivalent by adding up the mathematical value of all the letters of the name.' 'A Hebrew spelling of Nero's name was *nrwn qsr* (pronounced: Neron Kaiser),' says Gentry. 'It has been documented by archaeological finds that a first century Hebrew spelling of Nero's name provides us with precisely the value of 666.'" (p.187). Even more remarkable is the fact that a textual variant of Rev. 13:17 has the number 616 which Bruce M. Metzger suggests may reflect the Latin form of Nero Caesar (*nrw qsr*) which is equivalent to 616.²⁷ But before we get all carried away with the answer to such a longstanding riddle it should be noted that Irenaeus believed the calculation should be done in Greek not Hebrew even though he could not figure out who was being referred to. The number 616 could also apply to Gaius Caesar (better known as the infamous Caligula). Donald Guthrie reports that "in a recent article E. Stauffer makes the plausible suggestion that the number should be calculated in Greek from the official title of the reigning emperor. He (Stauffer) believes that emperor to be Domitian, but suggests the calculation should be made from the abbreviation of the full title Αυτοκρατωρ Καισαρ Δομετιανος Σεβαστος Γερμανικος (i.e. A. KAI. DOMET. ΣΕΒ. ΓΕ, which totals 666)."²⁸ (p.960) So while it is possible that the beast of Revelation is Nero it is my no means certain unless of course you must prove a pre-70 A.D. date.

At its best preterism makes us think and re-examine our understanding of the Scriptures, which is always a good and healthy thing. At its worst preterism of the more "consistent" variety makes too many assumptions and sweeping generalizations. When organized into a systematic structure that is rigorously applied to the Scriptures this form of preterism begins to change the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. It is most ironic that what is being advanced in some circles today as a way of preserving the integrity of Jesus does so at the expense of some of the most precious doctrines of the Christian faith. Contrary to the claims of consistent preterism, the destruction of Jerusalem was not the great and final second coming of our Lord. We have not entered into all that they Lord has for us. We look forward to a salvation and a freedom from sin, sickness, sorrow and death that is more real and more tangible than anything we have begun to experience thus far. And in the words of Peter, in keeping with God's promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness (2Pet. 3:13). In light of the flexibility of the kingdom and the clear teaching of our Lord in Mt. 24 we understand at least a little of what Paul is talking about when he says: "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to

²⁷ Sproul, *The Last Days According To Jesus*, pp.187-188.

²⁸ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (1979), p.960.

all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright lives in the present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you" (Titus 2:11-15).

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