

Preterism, The Millennium, and Historical Contingencies

An Essay

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Introduction

Matters of theology have always been controversial. But while the Church over the past two millennia has managed to hammer out some semblance of unanimity on many difficult questions, it is, perhaps fittingly, its failure to come to consensus on issues of eschatology which is most conspicuous. And maybe the reasons for this are not too hard to find. Once, in a private conversation with someone on the subject, he offered to me that agreement in the future was to continue to prove impossible “because none of this stuff has happened yet.”

My friend was adopting what is known as a *futurist* stance (in this case, Dispensational). But there is another way of approaching Bible prophecy, an approach known as *preterism*, which envisions many, if not all events depicted in Revelation as having already taken place.

My own position, which will be outlined here, adopts some aspects of preterism while acknowledging the possibility of recapitulating “fulfillments” that may or may not take place in the future. John, in other words, was primarily writing for his original audience, and we should try to interpret these visions in that context.¹

It’s obvious that not everyone conversant on the subject finds this solution to be satisfying at all. How, they ask, can anyone possibly take seriously the notion that the events of AD 70 (specifically, the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans) are a suitable “stand in” for the apocalyptic literary devices that John uses?

These objections are not to be minimized. But many principally stem from a serious misunderstanding of Bible prophecy, the way it was intended to function and what its actual intents were vis-à-vis its fulfillment, or “filling out.” In particular is the “millennium” referred to in Revelation chapter 20, a genuine understanding of which is within our grasp, if we are only to look at the way prophecy has been “fulfilled” to this point. To do that, we must first look at how prophecy functioned in the Old Testament.

Prophecy in the Old Testament

The great majority of Christians tend to look at the Bible’s prophetic statements in terms of a one-to-one fulfillment, in which a prediction (say, a virgin birth in Isaiah 7:14) comes to full fruition in the New Testament book of Matthew, a fulfillment supposedly mentioned by the

writer of that Gospel to “prove” that the remarkable circumstances of Jesus’ birth had been predicted centuries before. In fact, many evangelicals view this purported understanding of prophecy to be one of the stronger weapons in the Christian apologetic arsenal, almost in the way that the Periodic Table of Elements allows the chemist to predict the outcomes of chemical reactions. And indeed, there are a number of predictions in the Old Testament that function in this way, for instance the mention of Cyrus as the liberator of God’s people decades before the fact.²

But a careful reading and comparison with some of the Old Testament prophecies reveal some disturbing departures from this model. There is the matter of a 40 year exile of the Egyptians in Ezekiel 29: 1-16 which has no historic counterpart, or a restoration of Sodom and Samaria in the same book (16:53) that never took place, nor was Jerusalem “devastated” to the degree depicted in Ezekiel 21:27.³

These discrepancies from the common model are not limited to the book of Ezekiel, either. At the end of the book of Haggai, God declares that one of the postexilic leaders, Zerubbabel, is to be his “signet ring,” and that through him, God was to “shake the nations.” But as a matter of actual fact, Zerubbabel disappears from the historical scene. And the nations are merely stirred, not shaken.⁴ Clearly, then, if we are to retain the value of Scripture, this common model is inadequate. What is to replace it?

Fortunately, we can find a solution within the pages of the Scripture itself. In the book of Jeremiah,⁵ God has the prophet accompany him to watch a potter at work. After imparting to Jeremiah the illustration that the destiny of the nations are in the Potter’s (God’s) hands, God informs Jeremiah that prophetic statements carry with them a caveat: that whether or not the nations’ futures conform precisely to the prophetic utterances is largely contingent on their response to the prophecy in the first place. Repentance can alter or even abolish punishment; indifference, or worse, disobedience, can revoke blessing and invoke curses.

In Old Testament prophecies, sometimes the conditions are specified, and sometimes they are not. (The prophecy against Ninevah in Jonah is an illustration of the latter). But the interpreter can usually assume that there are contingent factors unless the prophecy is accompanied by an oath from the Lord. These utterances are unalterable, but usually not very specific. They serve the purpose of setting the parameters in which God will work to His purposes by necessary, free, and contingent means.⁶

This approach to Old Testament prophecy is completely in keeping with the suzerain-vassal relationship the nation of Israel had to their God.⁷ Biblical prophets functioned as covenant emissaries, and at times, covenant prosecutors, in which they were commissioned to remind the people that they were in violation of the covenant and that as their suzerain, God was completely within his rights to initiate legal proceedings and hold the people of Israel in abeyance. In fact the book of Isaiah opens with just such a “courtroom” scene.⁸

What must be kept in mind in reading such passages is this: For Isaiah’s original audience, *these covenant threats and offers were not metaphorical. The events and situations depicted in Isaiah have primary application to Isaiah’s time.* They constituted genuine, *bona fide* offers (or threats)

from the suzerain to his vassals, to motivate repentance and trust in their Lord for protection and prosperity. Unfortunately, these *bona fide* offers did not lead to repentance. A 70 year exile was prophesied in Jeremiah 29, and toward the end of that period, Daniel (in chapter 9) fully realizes that the requisite repentance had not been made. In the following vision, Daniel is told that the exile was going to be prolonged 490 additional years (70 x 7). There was going to be a restoration, of sorts, on the promised schedule. But it would be nothing like the glorious return to the land depicted in Isaiah,⁹ instead, it would be a “rump restoration,” as it were. Had Hezekiah acted suitably as a king in the Davidic line, not only would the Exile never have taken place, but the Davidic King, the “Wonderful Counselor” of Isaiah 9 may well have been born to Hezekiah, and the end of history would have taken place at that point.¹⁰ Instead, the implication when reading Daniel 9 is that the Consummation was to take place 490 years after the edict went out to restore Jerusalem.

One more thing is certain: No one among Isaiah’s original audience would ever have understood this passage to predict the arrival of a desert eccentric, wearing camel’s hair clothing and subsisting on a diet of locusts and honey.¹¹

Prophecy in the New Testament: Have the Rules Changed?

Now we should ask whether or not we should apply the same understanding as it concerns New Testament prophecies. In short, the answer is “yes”.

Herman Ridderbos points out that the structure of the apostolate found its origins in the Jewish legal system. In essence, the Apostles had been given “power of attorney” to act on behalf of Christ, and it is from this that we derive legitimacy to the canon of Scripture (which was Ridderbos’ concern).¹² But the parallel between this and the Old Testament prophetic office of covenant emissary is striking. This would seem to reinforce the notion that the *rules haven’t changed*. We need to look at the prophetic writings of Paul, John, Peter *et al* in the same way we read Old Testament prophecy.

It is not a coincidence that immediately prior to Christ’s prophetic discourse in Matthew 24, he reminds his Pharasaic audience of the injustices, indignities, and violent deaths suffered by the prophets of God at their hands (and by implication including himself among their number). In addition, in chapter 23: 37-38 he says: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate.” Christ did in fact make a genuine offer of the kingdom to that present generation, but they “were not willing,” so the Dispensationalists (and others) are right on that score.¹³

Not only this, but in the midst of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus adds in 24:20, “Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath.” In other words contingencies, especially the contingencies of faithful prayer, would be a factor in determination of the time of fulfillment.

Based upon what we’ve seen so far, then, any sort of “discrepancy” between Jesus’ prophecy and the historical record need not alarm us. If Jesus is indeed talking about the fall of Jerusalem in this passage (as I believe he is) then it isn’t necessary to adopt a “futurist” stance simply because

of the words of Matthew 24: 29-33, which seem to imply that the Consummation of history was to take place “immediately after the distress of those days,” i.e., the fall of Jerusalem. *Historical contingencies subsequent to Jesus’ prophetic statement took history in another direction.* The Consummation has been delayed, just as it was in Daniel 9.

With this in mind, I conclude that the purpose and application of Biblical prophecy displays a beautiful continuity throughout the Bible. Not only this, but it finally enables us to get a hand on what John is telling us in Revelation.

Revelation 20:1-10

A typical amillennialist¹⁴ understanding of this passage sees the number of “one thousand” as symbolic, just as he understands that the angel is not holding a real key and a real chain.¹⁵ It’s also important to recognize that John is using a literary device of *recapitulation*. In this instance, the events of chapter 20 do not chronologically follow the battle depicted in chapter 19.¹⁶ Instead, they lead up to it. This era, as Riddlebarger puts it, is “anything but a golden age when lions and lambs play together. This period is marked by conflict, martyrdom, and revolt against God.”¹⁷

Given that everything else in this passage is symbolic, it may seem reasonable to conclude that the number “one thousand” is symbolic as well. And it must be admitted that numeric symbolism is rampant throughout the book.¹⁸ But this is also true of the Old Testament books of Jeremiah and Daniel, and yet sometimes their numbers *are* to be taken at face value. The period of exile described in Jeremiah 29 (70 years) is probably reflective of a standard formula in ancient Near Eastern cultures for a period of “a god’s displeasure with his people.”¹⁹ As the Chronicler notes in 2 Chronicles 36: 20-23, as well as Zechariah in Zechariah 1:12, this prophecy was declared to have been fulfilled at the return and rebuilding of Jerusalem in 539/538 BC²⁰ So while we may not be able to say “literally” fulfilled, the use of “approximately” seems appropriate. The same can be said for Daniel’s “seventy sevens” (or seventy weeks) prophecy in Daniel 9. Interpreted as “weeks of years,” the time indicated in Daniel correlates closely enough to the time of Jesus’ ministry and death. Here again, the prophecy regarding a duration of a time period is to be taken at face value.

So that while some numbers in Revelation are not to be interpreted literally (such as the cryptogram “666” used to identify the Beast in Revelation 13:18, or the 144,000 (12,000 from each tribe) in Revelation 7 (perhaps symbolic of a “completeness” of the full number brought into the kingdom), it seems that at least on occasion, *it is appropriate to see numerical values of a duration of time as a genuine indication of the actual length of time until fulfillment.*

Obviously, Satan was not briefly released approximately 1,000 years ago, nor was there anything like the climactic battle of Revelation 19, to say nothing of a return of Christ. But following the line of thought I’ve been developing here, the possibility of an extension of time to the Millennium cannot be easily dismissed. For us to say this with certainty would, of course, require further revelation from God. Is this a conceivable possibility?

¹⁴“The question may be raised, whether, within the limits of the principles here laid down, there can be expected still further revelation entitled to a place in the scheme of New Testament revelation. Unless

we adopt the mystical standpoint, which cuts loose the subjective from the objective, the only proper answer to this question is, that new revelation can be added only, in case new objective events of a supernatural character take place, needing for their understanding a new body of interpretation supplied by God. *This will actually be the case in the eschatological issue of things.* [Emphasis mine, L.G.] What then occurs will constitute a new epoch in redemption worthy to be placed by the side of the great epochs in the Mosaic age and the age of the first Advent. Hence the Apocalypse mingles with the pictures of the final events transpiring the word of prophecy and interpretation.”²¹

The possibility remains, then, that at the Eschaton, new revelation from God will bring the predictions of the New Testament, particularly the Millennium of Revelation 20, into sharp relief.

Objections to a Preterist Approach

There are marked advantages to taking this “modified preterist” approach to the interpretation of New Testament revelation. Prominent among these advantages is that there is no longer any pressure on the interpreter to explain why the events Jesus speaks of in his Olivet Discourse were not fully realized. Far from being a “false prophet” as some charge, Jesus is squarely within the prophetic tradition. This approach is also useful as a remedy for Dispensationalism.

But, it is asked, what about some of those future events like the return of Christ, the resurrection, judgment, and the eternal state? How can it be said that these were “fulfilled?” But these difficulties are not nearly so insurmountable as they initially seem.

We’ve already seen that the glorious restoration of Israel to the Land prophesied in Isaiah was not fully realized, at least to the extent it was depicted. Instead, the realization was truncated, a shadow of what had been offered, truncated due to the intransigence and sin of the people. Once we understand that the Consummation delineated in Revelation has been similarly abbreviated, the difficulties melt away. Christ did return, not fully in the way Revelation describes, but instead to judge his covenant people. The statement in Revelation 22:12 in which Christ promises “recompense, to repay every one for what he had done,” can be interpreted in this light to be a truncated picture of what will take place completely at a later Day of Judgment. In short, once we read Revelation in the way we read Isaiah, for instance, the events that John draws up for us, while having immediate and primary application to his day, can also serve to point up a far more grandiose future fulfillment.

But isn’t an early date for Revelation problematic, especially in light of Irenaeus’ statement about the vision of John being seen during the reign of Domitian? No, Irenaeus statement taken alone cannot be determinative in discarding an early date, especially in light of other statements of chronology Irenaeus made that are almost certainly incorrect.²²

Despite John’s use of the words “soon” or “quickly” (*tachos*) or “the time is near” (*eggus*) many have objected that these cannot be taken at face value because, again, so many of the events depicted are future to us. But a proper understanding of a “contingent” fulfillment brings the essential fulfillments right into John’s era, and this has the advantage of showing a proper respect to the text. Essentially, Jesus *did* come “soon” in his initial judgment of AD 70, but this does not preclude his coming again in the future, this time in full force, with full recompense, both good and bad.

Doesn't a literal understanding of the Temple in chapter 11, in particular the forty-two months of 11:2 in which the outer court and the city will be "trampled underfoot" point to a necessarily future fulfillment? Yes, a *literal* understanding demands that, but as we've seen in the instances of the other temporal prophecies, they have been fulfilled in *approximate* time periods, not "exact," and so the historic time of Vespasian's arrival in Palestine to the final destruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem works quite well, completely in keeping with other fulfilled prophecies that no one contends.

Many of the other objections to a modified preterist approach can be met just as easily, but perhaps the most general one, that such an approach vitiates the worth of Revelation for today, needs to be addressed. Doesn't seeing the book of Revelation being "essentially" fulfilled greatly reduce its value for the church of today? To that I can only respond, "Yes, if you believe that the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, *et al* also have a reduced value for today." More to the point, if one objects to this modified preterist approach to Revelation as impossible, he has serious problems in accounting for what happens in those Old Testament books.

Some find the notion of "exact," literal fulfillment comforting, but that was not the experience of the Old Testament saints, nor should we reasonably expect this to be the case for ourselves. Isn't this completely in keeping with the "already, but not yet" understanding of the Kingdom's manifestation in the world? True faith, *authentic* faith, is never easy. It was not meant to be.

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¹ My intent here is not to *disprove* a primarily Futurist approach, but only to demonstrate that it is not *necessary*.

² Isaiah 44:28

³ These and other discrepancies are fully documented in Robert R. Chisholm's *Handbook On the Prophets*, Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Academic, 2002, p.231-290.

⁴ Apologies to Ian Fleming.

⁵ Jeremiah 18: 1-10 NIV

⁶ See the address by Richard Pratt, *Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions*; presented to the faculty of the Reformed Theological Seminary, 23 November 1993.

⁷ Chisholm, *Handbook of the Prophets*, p.15.

⁸ Ibid. pg. 15.

⁹ For example, Isaiah 40:3 and following, in which the construction of a processional "superhighway" for the purposes of conveying a triumphant Israel out of captivity in Babylon to their Land. See *Chisholm's Handbook On the Prophets*, p. 94.

¹⁰ This is not to say that there would have been no need for an Atonement, only that the scenario may have played out in a significantly different way.

¹¹ Matthew 3: 1-4.

¹² Hermann Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, Phillipsburg, NJ, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. 1963, rev. ed. 1988, pg. 14

¹³ It is also true that a broken clock is right twice a day.

¹⁴ The writer is an amillennialist.

¹⁵ Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism; Understanding the End Times*, Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Books and Inter Varsity Press, 2003, p. 199.

¹⁶ Ibid. Pg. 202. Riddlebarger devises a chart demonstrating the parallels between Rev. 12: 7-11 and Rev. 20: 1-6 that proves very helpful in illustrating how recapitulation functions.

¹⁷ Ibid. Pg. 207.

¹⁸ Ibid. pg. 209-210.

¹⁹ *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*, Richard Pratt, ed. Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2003. See the study notes for Jeremiah 25:11-12.

²⁰ Ibid. Study notes for Jeremiah 25: 11-12.

²¹ Vos, G., *Biblical Theology. Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1948 (1977)) Pg. 304.

²² Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*. Atlanta, GA, American Vision, 1998, p. 63-64. Irenaeus said many interesting things, including that Jesus' ministry continued into his mid-40's (based on John 8:57). Of course, to be in error in one instance does not prove Irenaeus to be in error in another, but the cumulative case Gentry builds in this book is more than sufficient to demonstrate that an early date for the composition of Revelation is a viable possibility. The chapter pertaining to the Irenaeus quotation demonstrates that undue reliance on its veracity is not warranted.