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Preterism 101: The Foundations of Fulfilled Eschatology

As more and more people become serious students of “last things,” the number of those investigating Preterism is constantly increasing. Hence, there is a recurring need to set forth the “first principles” of the Preterist interpretation of scripture. In this article, we will look at the foundations of fulfilled eschatology.

Idealism

There are three basic interpretative schools of “eschatology,” or the “study of last things.” These are Futurism, Preterism, and Idealism. Idealism was the dominate view from A.D. 400-1200. Idealism takes an allegorical approach to Revelation and related books, viewing them as depicting abstractly the struggle and eventual triumph of good over evil, but not tied to or portraying any particular events in

history. Augustine is probably the father of Idealism and his book “The City of God” is still the best known example of this approach. Robert Mounce, in his commentary on Revelation defined Idealism, saying, “Revelation is a theological poem presenting the ageless struggle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. It is a philosophy of history wherein Christian forces are continuously meeting and conquering the demonic forces of evil.”¹

¹ Robert Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 43.

The late nineteenth century scholar William Milligan described Idealism, saying, “While the Apocalypse thus embraces the whole period of the Christian dispensation, it sets before us within this period the action of great principles and not special incidents; we are not to look in the Apocalypse for special events, but for the exhibition of the principles which govern the history of both the world and the Church.”²

By this view, the battles of Revelation portray spiritual struggles of any and every age of history; the beast is any political movement or government opposing or persecuting the church; the harlot is any corrupt form of the church, or worldly seduction, etc. In short, the book of Revelation, rather than portraying in symbolic language actual events prophesied by Christ and the apostles and prophets, is loosed from all historic anchorage and set adrift upon the sea of history where it has no certain or particular meaning whatever.

Futurism - Apocalyptic

Futurism, as the name implies, operates upon the assumption that the second coming of Christ is a future event. Idealism also typically assumes the second coming has yet to occur, but where Futurism attempts to identify specific events in history to predict when the second coming will occur, Idealism is just content to leave Revelation a closed book of abstract allegories. Idealism was replaced briefly during the 13th century with a form of Futurism we may call “apocalypticism.” Apocalypticism differs from Futurism in that while both view the second coming as an imminent event, apocalypticism produces new visions and revelations of the end. The Essenes are an example of an apocalyptic sect that looked for the imminent end of the age, and were involved in visions and prophecies, many of which have been preserved and come down to us in the Dead Sea Scrolls (e.g., the book of Jubilees, the War Scroll, etc.).

Apocalypticism in the 13th century was ignited by Joachim of Fiore (A.D. 1132-1202), who interpreted

² William Milligan, *The Book of Revelation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889), 153-4.

the book of Revelation as teaching that there were three stages to history corresponding to the three persons of the Trinity: The first age corresponded to the Father, which was the era of fear and of law; the second age corresponded to the Son, and was marked by the gospel; the third age would correspond to the Holy Spirit, and would be marked by monastic-like purity and devotion. Joachim taught that the second age was already drawing to a close, and that the third epoch would begin about A.D. 1260. Joachim’s predictions excited a spirit of apocalyptic frenzy in his followers, who produced many new visions and prophecies of the end. In Rev. 12:6, 14, the woman (the church) goes into hiding 1260 days (42 months, 3 ½ years) during the persecution of Saul, Caiaphas, and Pilate. However, taking the 1260 days for years, followers of Joachim believed the true church was in hiding, repressed by the corrupt institutions of the Catholic Church, which would emerge from hiding in the year A.D. 1260. However, when A.D. 1260 came and went and nothing happened, the movement died off, and Idealism again became dominant until the Reformation, when belief that the Catholic Church is portrayed in prophecy was revived under a species of Futurism called “Historicism.”

Futurism - Historicism

Historicism—also called the “Continuous Historical method”—saw portrayed in the books of Daniel and Revelation a continuous panorama of history, beginning with the Babylonian captivity until the world’s end. However, as the role of the Roman Empire in end-time prophecy is unmistakably portrayed and universally admitted, following the collapse of Rome, the prophecies were extended and kept alive by affirming that the Empire was still extant in the Catholic Church and papacy, which were believed to be its successors. The ten horns of Daniel’s fourth beast, rather than the ten senatorial provinces created by Augustus in 27 B.C., became ten nations of the Holy Roman Empire; the “little horn,” rather than portraying Nero Caesar, who persecuted the saints 3 ½ years and was destroyed by the coming of Christ in A.D. 66-70, became the Catholic Church and papacy. In Revelation, the beast and Harlot were similarly interpreted, the Catholic Church replacing the Roman Empire. Protestant Reformers and church, saw themselves in the

imagery of Daniel and Revelation portrayed by the woman persecuted by the Catholic Church; Protestants thus supposed themselves to be living in the “last days” and expected the world’s end, sometimes resulting in violent outbreaks and revolutions in Europe: the Fifth Monarchy men of the Puritan Revolution under Olive Cromwell being but a single example (the Fifth Monarchy refers to the Kingdom of Christ that would follow the four world empires portrayed by Daniel, which some supposed the revolution that overthrew Charles I would inaugurate). However, in time Historicism exhausted its credibility and died a sudden death with William Miller and the Millerite Movement in the 1840’s, whose twice failed predictions of Christ’s return delivered its death blow.

Furturism - Premillennial Dispensationalism

About the time Historicism died, Premillennial Dispensationalism was born, and has grown until it is the dominate view today. This view was developed in the 1830’s by John Nelson Darby and made popular by the Scofield Reference Bible, edited by Cyrus Scofield and published by Oxford University Press. The essential elements of this form of Futurism is belief in the secret “pre-tribulation” rapture of the saints, followed by the physical, bodily return of Christ and a literal thousand-year reign on earth. Dispensationalism teaches that Christ came, not to die upon a Roman cross, but to establish an earthly kingdom. However, when rejected by the Jews, God seized upon the church and gospel as a type of parenthesis in God’s covenantal dealings with the Jews until they are ready to accept Christ as king, when Jesus will then return and establish his kingdom upon earth in which the Jews would share rule. In other words, God deals with the Jews differently than other men, and does not require that they obey the gospel to be saved; the church and gospel were not the “eternal purpose” God ordained for man’s salvation as taught by Christ and Paul (Eph. 1:; 10; 3:11), but stop-gap measures undertaken when the Jews frustrated God’s purpose by rejecting Christ.

Several leaders within the Plymouth Brethren, a movement started by Darby himself, deemed Darby’s views heretical for teaching two distinct and separate

ways to salvation, one for Jews and one for Gentiles: If the Church were removed and a Jewish remnant were the fruit of God’s redemptive work apart from Christ then it must be the result of “another” Gospel condemned by the Apostle Paul in Galatians. Indeed, quite apart from Darby’s views, millennialism in general was condemned by the Ausburg Confession: “Art. XVII - We also condemn all others who are now spreading the Jewish idea that before the dead are raised, the godly will rule this world and that everywhere the ungodly will be overcome.” Similarly, the Second Helvetic Confession states: “We also reject the Jewish dream of a millennium, or golden age on earth, before the last judgment.” Calvin wrote in his Institutes that millennialism is a “fiction” “too childish either to need or to be worth a refutation.”³

Foundational Assumptions & Observations of Preterism

The third interpretative school of “end things” is Preterism. The word “preterist” is from the Latin “ire” (to go) and prae (before), i.e., *to go before*; the past participle is “praeteritus,” from which we get the English word *preterist – has gone past*. The Latin Vulgate uses the future tense of this word in Matt. 24:34: “*non praeteribit haec generatio donec omnia haec fiant*” (“this generation will not pass away until all these things be fulfilled”). Use of the term *praeteribit* in Jesus’ Olivet Discourse makes the name “preterist” particularly appropriate, since Preterists take the view that Jesus’ prophecies, as well as those of Daniel, Revelation, Thessalonians, and the rest, were all fulfilled within the generation of the first disciples. Some of the basic assumptions and observations of Preterists in support of this conclusion include:

1. There have been many “days of the Lord”;
2. There have been many “comings” (visitations) of the Lord;

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, XXV

3. The language of the Prophet's is figurative and poetic;

4. The time statements of the New Testament must be accepted at face value

Old Testament "Days of the Lord"

When we open the New Testament, among the first things we encounter are predictions of coming eschatological judgment. Such predictions are all through the gospels and epistles, almost on every page. This time of eschatological judgment was called the "day of the Lord." Peter mentions it by name twice (Acts 2:17-21; II Pet. 3:10-13). Paul also uses the phrase:

"But of the times and seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape." I Thess. 5:1-3

Other times the eschatological crisis is referred to by as the "coming" (I Thess. 4:15) or "appearing" (II Tim. 4:1) of the Lord, or "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (I Cor. 1:8), or "that day" (II Thess. 1:10). It is essential to our understanding of New Testament eschatology to realize that the Old Testament records many days of the Lord. These were not "eschatological;" they occurred within the parameters of the existing age and did not mark its end or termination. However, since the phrase is applied equally to both, we cannot hope to understand its significance in the New Testament unless we first understand its use in the Old Testament. Briefly stated, a "day of the Lord" refers to a time of divine judgment upon men and nations, typically by invasion of foreign armies, but also including drought, famine, pestilence, and various plagues, including crop-destroying insects (locusts, cankerworms, etc.), often all at the same time. I am not aware of any example of a "day of the Lord" confined to judgment of a single nation. Rather, the term seems to be have been used of times of *world-judgment*, which overtook multiple nations. Isaiah thus describes the fall of Babylon, saying:

"Howl ye; for the day of the Lord is at hand; it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty. Therefore shall all hands be faint, and every man's heart shall melt...Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it...And I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogance of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible." Isa. 13:1-11

Notice, that although the prophecy is specifically directed against Babylon (v. 1, 19), the coming destruction was part of a larger time of *world-encompassing* divine wrath (v. 11): God would use the armies of the Mede-Persian Empire to punish Babylon and the world. Another example occurs in the book of Zephaniah:

"I will utterly consume all things from off the land, saith the Lord. I will consume man and beast; I will consume the fowls of the heaven, and the fishes of the sea, and the stumbling-blocks with the wicked; and I will cut off man from off the land, saith the Lord. I will also stretch out mine hand upon Judah, and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem...Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord God: for the day of the Lord is at hand: for the Lord hath prepared a sacrifice, he hath bid his guests...The great day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the Lord: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly. That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of the trumpet and alarm against the fenced cities, and against the high towers...the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of his jealousy: for he shall make even a speedy riddance of all them that dwell in the land." Zeph. 1:14-18

This prophecy was given in the days of Josiah, king of Judah (v. 1), and foretold the coming

destruction of Judah by the Babylonians. However, divine wrath was in no way confined to the Jews: Zephaniah also names Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron of the Philistines, Moab, Ammon, Ethiopia, and Assyria among the nations and cities that would suffer visitation (Zeph. 2:4-12). Zephaniah's prophecy thus answers to Isaiah's "little apocalypse" (Isa. 24; cf. Jer. 4:23-27), which describes God's wrath upon the ancient world by the Assyrio-Babylonian and Mede-Persian invasions in terms of "emptying of the earth" of inhabitants, and returning earth to its primordial chaos before creation. The nations and cities that were to suffer divine wrath included Palestine, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Syria, Ethiopia, Egypt, Tema, Seir, Edom, Arabia, Kedar, Elam, Kir, Tyre, and Zidon (Isa. 14-23).

Another example of a "day of the Lord" occurs in Ezekiel, where the prophet foretells wrath upon Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, Lydia, Chub, and various mingled peoples of northern Africa.

"Son of man, prophesy and say, Thus saith the Lord God; Howl ye, Woe worth the day! For the day is near, even the day of the Lord is near, a cloudy day; it shall be the time of the heathen. And the sword shall come upon Egypt, and great pain shall be in Ethiopia, when the slain shall fall in Egypt, and they shall take away her multitude, and her foundations shall be broken down. Ethiopia, and Libya, and Lydia, and all the mingled people, Chub, and the men of the land that is in league, shall fall with them by the sword." Ezek. 30:2-5

This is the same "day of the Lord" already discussed, which was fulfilled by the armies of the Babylonians (Ezek. 30:10). We call separate attention to it here to emphasize the prolific use of the term in the Old Testament, and that it describes a time of *world-wrath*, which witnessed the overthrow of governments and nations, but not the end of the world or cosmos itself.

Old Testament Comings & Visitations of the Lord

Like "days of the Lord," there are numerous examples of the Lord's coming and visitation in the Old Testament. We do not speak here of the Lord's

appearance to Abraham (Gen. 18:1-3, 33), Moses (Ex. 3:1-6), Joshua (Jos. 5:13-15), Gideon (Jud. 6:11, 12), or such like, for these manifestations shed no light upon the second coming of Christ as the Son of man. Rather, we confine our inquiry here to providential comings in divine judgment and wrath, for it is here that we gain a window into Christ's second coming. In reality, a "day of the Lord" is by definition a coming and visitation of the Lord, and the "days of the Lord" we have examined all involved the Lord's coming in wrath and judgment upon men and nations. Our purpose here therefore is to note the how these occur together. We have seen the "day of the Lord" by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians that would overtake Egypt. Isaiah describes these same events as a coming of the Lord:

"The burden of Egypt. Behold, the Lord rideth upon a swift cloud, and shall come into Egypt: and the idols of Egypt shall be moved at his presence, and the heart of Egypt shall melt in the midst of it. And I will set the Egyptians against the Egyptians: and they shall fight everyone against his neighbor; city against city, and kingdom against kingdom...And the Egyptians will I give over into the hand of a cruel lord; and a fierce king shall rule over them, saith the Lord of hosts." Isa. 19:1-4

This language is particularly insightful when compared with New Testament descriptions of Christ's second coming: It involves a coming of the Lord upon clouds, in which his presence visits wrath in the form of war, destruction, and national servitude, all of which occur in the Olivet Discourse (Lk. 21:20-24; Matt. 24:30).

The overthrow of Babylon by the armies of Cyrus (Isa. 45:1), which Isaiah called a "day of the Lord," is also expressly described as a coming of the Lord:

"I have commanded my sanctified ones, I have also called my mighty ones for mine anger, even them that rejoice in my highness. The noise of a multitude in the mountains, like as of a great people; a tumultuous noise of the kingdoms of nations gathered together: the Lord of hosts mustereth the host of the battle. They come

from a far country, from the end of heaven, even the Lord, and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole land.” Isa. 13:3-5

Isaiah says the Lord “comes” in the kingdoms he gathers together to overthrow Babylon; the armies of the Medes and Persians are the weapons of his indignation. Another example of the Lord coming in judgment occurs in the book of Micah, which describes God’s judgment upon Samaria and Jerusalem by the Assyrio-Babylonian invasions:

“Hear all ye people; hearken, O earth, and all that therein is: and let the Lord God be witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple. For, behold, the Lord cometh forth out of his place, and will come down, and tread upon the high places of the earth. And the mountains shall be molten under him, and the valleys shall be cleft, as wax before the fire, and as the waters that are poured down a steep place. For the transgression of Jacob is all this, and for the sins of the house of Israel. What is the transgression of Jacob? Is it not Samaria? And what are the high places of Judah? Are they not Jerusalem? Therefore I will make Samaria as an heap of the field, and as plantings of a vineyard: and I will pour down the stones thereof into the valley, and I will discover the foundations thereof.” Mic. 1:2-6

Micah describes the Lord *coming forth* from his place, *coming down* to the earth, and overthrowing cities unto their very foundations. In this, as in the previous examples, the Lord’s coming was not physical and visible, but spiritual and providential, discernable only to the eye of the understanding by the judgments and world-events that transpired. Paul describes Christ’s coming in precisely these same terms:

“That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ: which in his times he shall shew, who is the only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man

hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting, Amen.” I Tim. 6:14-16

Paul says no man has seen nor can see Christ in his full divinity, but that he would show his divinity and godhead providentially at his appearing in the world-events that would attend his coming. The idea of Christ’s physical, visible, bodily coming to destroy the cosmos is completely groundless. Another point we should notice about Micah’s description is that it is highly figurative and poetic: the melting of the mountains so that they pour down like water in a steep place describe the pouring down of the rocks of the hill of Samaria, uncovering the foundations of city’s walls and defensive munitions. This leads to the next point we need to visit, which is the figurative and hyperbolic nature of prophetic language employed in “days of the Lord” and his coming in wrath.

The Figurative and Poetic Nature of Prophetic Utterance

Students of the New Testament are familiar the language of a “collapsing cosmos” in which stars fall out of sky, the sun is black like sackcloth and the moon is blood. It is often supposed that this language is quite literal. However, this language has a long history in the Old Testament and it was always intended to be poetic and figurative, not literal. Consider the following example from the “day of the Lord” on Babylon:

“Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it. For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine. ..Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth shall remove out of her place, in the wrath of the Lord of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger...Their children also shall be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses shall be spoiled, and their wives ravished. Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them, which shall not regard silver; and as

for gold, they shall not delight in it. Their bows also shall dash the young men to pieces; and they shall have no pity on the fruit of the womb; their eyes shall not spare children. And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah." Isa. 13:9-19

This is the same time of judgment we have surveyed several times before. Here, however, we want to notice the hyperbolic nature of the language. The *usus loquendi* (manner of speaking) of the prophet is highly charged: The stars, sun, and moon are darkened over Babylon at her fall; the heavens are shaken and the earth is removed out of its place. However, no one would contend these things actually occurred in 539 B.C. when Cyrus took the city: They are merely poetic expressions employed to emphasize the cataclysmic nature of Babylon's fall.

Another example from the book of Isaiah is God's judgment upon Edom and Idumea, which occurred as part of the larger time of world-judgment upon the nations. According to Obadiah, Edom treacherously forgot the brotherly covenant and participated in the spoil of Jerusalem by the Babylonians; hence God would visit Edom for its evil deeds against the Jews:

"Come near, ye nations, to hear; and hearken, ye people: let the earth hear, and all that is therein; the world, and all things that come forth of it. For the indignation of the Lord is upon all nations, and his fury upon all their armies: he hath utterly destroyed them, he hath delivered them to the slaughter. Their slain also shall be cast out, and their stink shall come up out of their carcases, and the mountains shall be melted with their blood. And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig tree...For it is the day of the LORD's vengeance, and the year of recompence for the controversy of Zion." Isa. 34:1-8

There are two points we want to observe about this portion of Isaiah's prophecy: First, as with early

examples, this day of the Lord's vengeance was a time of *world-wrath*; God's anger and judgment was upon "the world;" his indignation was upon "all nations." We know from the book of Jeremiah that God brought all nations into subjection under Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 27:6-11), whose empire was to be the first of four world kingdoms, and stood as a sort of "adumbration" or "foreshadow" of the kingdom of Christ, who received world-dominion at his ascension (Dan. 7:13, 14, 27). Edom would not escape, but would suffer the common fate of other nations. Second, the language of the mountains melting from the blood of the slain, the stars falling from their courses, and the heavens rolling up as a scroll are obvious poetic exaggerations, used to portray the utter devastation that would overtake Edom. If there were any doubt about the figurative nature of the language, the second half of the prophecy makes this clear:

"And the streams thereof shall be turned into pitch, and the dust thereof into brimstone, and the land thereof shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night nor day; the smoke thereof shall go up for ever: from generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever. But the cormorant and the bittern shall possess it; the owl also and the raven shall dwell in it: and he shall stretch out upon it the line of confusion, and the stones of emptiness. They shall call the nobles thereof to the kingdom, but none shall be there, and all her princes shall be nothing. And thorns shall come up in her palaces, nettles and brambles in the fortresses thereof: and it shall be an habitation of dragons, and a court for owls. The wild beasts of the desert shall also meet with the wild beasts of the island, and the satyr shall cry to his fellow; the screech owl also shall rest there, and find for herself a place of rest. There shall the great owl make her nest, and lay, and hatch, and gather under her shadow: there shall the vultures also be gathered, every one with her mate." Isa. 34:9-15

This half of the prophecy makes clear that the language of cosmic destruction is purely symbolic. The streams will be turned to pitch, the dust to brimstone (burning sulfur), and land burning pitch. Yet, for all that, the land will be inhabited by various beasts. How can beasts dwell in a land whose dust is burning sulfur and pitch? Clearly, they can't. Hence, the unavoidable conclusion is that none of this is intended to be understood literally or taken at face value, but expresses poetically the great desolations that would befall Edom.

The Eschatological Day of the Lord and New Testament Time Statements

Having surveyed the Old Testament "days of the Lord," his "comings" in wrath, and the figurative nature of prophetic utterance describing these events, we are now ready to turn to the New Testament. The prophecies of the New Testament were not spoken a vacuum: Christ and the apostles were Jews, who grew up in the synagogue listening to the Old Testament prophets read week to week; they were Jews and spoke to the Jewish people in the language and imagery with which the Jews were accustomed. Therefore, when we encounter prophetic language in the New Testament identical in form with that of the Old Testament, we may assume it is to be understood the same way. Absent clear evidence of intent to the contrary, language that was figurative in the Old Testament cannot suddenly be taken literally in the New Testament; otherwise how could the Jews ever understand what was being said? Thus, as we turn to New Testament prophecies of the "second coming" of Christ and "day of the Lord," we must keep in mind their continuity with Old Testament usage and precedent. More than that, however, New Testament eschatology is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy; prophecies of Christ's "second coming" and the "day of the Lord" were first uttered in the Old Testament. The only thing "new" about these prophecies was their *imminent fulfillment*. Thus, when Peter on the day of Pentecost following Christ's ascension warns of the coming "day of the Lord," he merely repeats a prophecy first uttered by Joel:

"But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, Ye

men of Judaea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words: For these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day. But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams: And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy: And I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke: The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and notable day of the Lord come: And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Acts 2:14-21

Peter quotes the prophet Joel, warning of a coming "day of the Lord" in terms identical with those we have encountered before, including sword and fire, and the darkening of the sun and moon. Having seen that this language was figurative in the Old Testament, we may conclude that it is figurative here in the New Testament. This is confirmed to a certain extent by Peter, who indicates that the things foretold by Joel were in the *midst of being fulfilled*, and concludes his sermon, saying, "Save yourselves from this untoward generation" (Acts 2:4). "This generation" echoes Jesus' great denunciation, in which he prophesied the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem:

"Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come

upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.” Matt. 23:34-39

After uttering these words, Jesus went across to the Mount of Olives, where he elaborated further upon his coming in wrath to destroy the city and temple, concluding with this time statement:

“Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.” Matt. 24:34

Jesus’ statement in his great denunciation, above, that the Jews would persecute his disciples from city to city, bringing all the righteous blood shed upon earth upon their heads at his coming, should be compared with Jesus’ identical statement in the so-called “limited commission”:

“But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come.” Matt. 10:23

Thus, we have three direct statements by Jesus that he would come in wrath upon that generation, and there are others besides these we have yet to look at. But if there were any question about the context of Peter’s words, the prophecy of Joel dispels all doubt:

“Blow the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand; a day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains: a great people and a strong; there hath not been ever the like, neither shall be any more after it, even to the years of many generations...The earth

shall quake before them; the heavens shall tremble: the sun and the moon shall be dark, and the stars shall withdraw their shining: And the Lord shall utter his voice before his army: for his camp is very great: for he is strong that executed his word: for the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; and who can abide it? Joel 2:1-11

Joel’s “day of the Lord” was a time of wrath that would specifically overtake the Jewish nation. The chronology of the prophecy is established by reference to chariots (2:5), swords (v. 8), the temple (1:9, 13, 16), priests (v. 9, 13; 2:7), assembling the people by trumpets (2:1, 15), meat and drink offerings (1:9; 2:14), and other incidents of ancient Jewish life. However, Joel’s prophecy is not confined to the Jews: he expands his words to include “all nations” (3:2); God would “sit to judge all the heathen round about” (v. 12). Joel’s language is identical with the tradition of other Old Testament prophets, and so should be understood the same way: He is not predicting the end of the cosmos, but a time of divine wrath and visitation upon the world, in which the Jews of Jesus’ generation were singled out for especial judgment.

The Day of the Lord and Destruction of the Jewish Nation in the Old Testament

Joel is not the only Old Testament prophet to warn of the destruction of the Jewish nation. In fact, there are so many of these prophecies that we cannot possibly look at them all, but must confine ourselves to a few. Therefore we will look at some of the earliest and the latest to establish the continuity and prominence of this theme. The earliest reference occurs in the book of Numbers, and was uttered by the prophet Balaam:

“I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth...Out of Jacob shall come he that shall have dominion, and shall destroy him that remaineth of the city...And ships shall come from the coast of Chittim, and shall afflict Asshur, and shall afflict Eber, and he also shall perish forever.” Num. 24:17-24

This is a prophecy of Christ, who was to obtain world dominion, not in an earthly kingdom as the Jews or Dispensationalists suppose, but at his ascension (Dan. 7:13, 14; I Pet. 3:22). At his ascension, Christ sat down on the right hand of God “henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool” (Heb. 10:13; cf. Ps. 110:1). Hence, Balaam ascribes divine wrath to Christ, and the overthrow his enemies is the prominent feature of his prophecy. We know from various sources, including Daniel (Dan. 11:30) and the Dead Sea scrolls, that the “Chittim” or “Kittim” refer to the Romans. “Asshur” refers to Assyria, the eastern-most border of the Roman Empire in the time of Christ; “Eber” was a descendant of Abraham (Gen. 11:16, 26). “Eber” is believed to be the root of the word “Hebrew;” thus the phrase “Abram the Hebrew” (Gen. 14:13); viz., the father of the Hebrew nation. The Chittim coming in ships to “afflict and destroy Eber forever” is therefore the first clear reference we have to the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem by Rome.

Moses, the lawgiver of the Jewish nation, also prophesied the destruction that would befall the nation in the latter days, but we cannot take time to visit these here, so we will merely provide the citations for the reader to pursue on his own (Deut. 31:28-32:43).

Isaiah’s prophecy of the new heavens and earth (Isa. 65-66) is a symbol for the world under the rule and dominion of Christ, in which he redeems his people from their enemies and gives them the ascendancy in earth; it contains several explicit references to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. The chronology of this prophecy is established by Stephen, who quoted it at his trial for saying Jesus would come and destroy the city and temple and change the customs Moses had given the people (Acts 6:14; 7:48-50). It is also quoted by Paul, who applied it to the Jews of his generation and their rejection of Christ (Rom. 10:20, 21). Thus, we have the double witness of these two men inspired men as to the historical context of the prophecy. The prophecy opens with the Lord saying

“I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people, which walketh in a

way that was not good, after their own thoughts.” Isa. 65:1, 2

This is quoted by Paul to the Romans regarding the Jews (Rom. 10:20, 21), whom he also calls “enemies of the gospel” (Rom. 11:28). The prophet continues, saying, God would bring forth a remnant seed out of Jacob (v. 8-10), but would destroy those rest:

“Therefore will I number you to the sword, and ye shall all bow down to the slaughter: because when I called, ye did not answer; when I spake, ye did not hear; but did evil before mine eyes, and did choose that wherein I delighted not.” Isa. 65:12

The Jews rejected Christ, choosing instead to establish their own system of righteousness through law-keeping and the temple ritual (Rom. 10:3). They wrongly supposed that the presence of the temple ensured God’s blessing and preservation, but this became undoing: God does not dwell in temples made with hands:

“Thus saith the Lord, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? And where is the place of my rest? For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those thing have been saith the Lord.” Isa. 66:1, 2

This was quoted by Stephen at his trial in support of the proposition that the temple was holy only insofar as a symbol of God’s presence. Stephen had charged that Christ would destroy the temple; he therefore cites Isaiah in this place to show that the destruction of the temple had been prophesied by Isaiah centuries before. How could Stephen be condemned for merely repeating what Isaiah had foretold?

“He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man; he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a dog’s neck; he that offereth an oblation, as if he offered swine’s blood; he that burneth incense, as if he blessed an idol. Yea, they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations.” Isa. 66:3

Here we see that continuation of the temple service was deemed an abomination to God. The temple

service was a grand object lesson pointing to the sacrifice and priesthood of Christ's cross. Jesus' fulfilled the law's demand for blood atonement at Calvary. Hence, the types and shadows embodied in the law ended at the cross (Col. 2:17; Heb. 10:10). The continuation of the temple service and animal sacrifices thus stood as an implicit denial of the sacrifice and high priesthood of Christ, and marked the Jewish nation for destruction. Not inappropriately, it was at the feast of Passover that the legions of Titus suddenly appeared on the Mount of Olives (cf. Zech. 14:4) and before the walls of Jerusalem, shutting up within city over a million Christ-denying worshippers who came from all over to celebrate the feast.⁴

"Hear the word of the Lord, ye that tremble at his word; Your brethren that hated you, and cast you out for my name's sake, said, Let the Lord be glorified: but he shall appear to your joy, and they shall be ashamed." Isa. 66:5

"Casting out for my name's sake" makes unmistakable reference to the Jews putting the disciples out of the synagogue for confessing Christ (cf. Jn. 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). However, Jesus would "appear" (come), redeeming them from their enemies' hands in the destruction of the Jewish nation:

"A voice of noise from the city, a voice from the temple, a voice for the Lord that rendereth recompense to his enemies...For behold, the Lord will come with fire, and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire...and they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh." Isa. 66.6, 15, 24

Here we have explicit reference to the destruction of the city and temple by Christ coming against the Jews, whose carcasses would be cast forth out of the

city into the Valley of Gehenna, like dung upon the face of the ground, where they were devoured by fire and maggots. Josephus reports that over 600,000 Jews died of famine during the siege were carried out of the city gates this way.⁵ Following defeat of the persecutors, the world was like a "new heaven and earth" marked by the righteous reign of Christ and the saints, in which the "new Jerusalem," the church, the covenantal habitation of the saints is the capital city, whose gates are open to all who seek salvation (II Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21, 22).

Still More Explicit References to the Fall of Jerusalem

We have seen Peter invoke Joel and Stephen invoke Isaiah to describe events overtaking the first century believers. Let's look now at Zechariah, Malachi, and John the Baptist.

"Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, and thy spoil shall be divided in the midst of thee. For I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and the city shall be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished; and half of the city shall go forth into captivity, and the residue of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then shall the Lord go forth, and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle." Zech. 14:1-3

The historical context of this "day of the Lord" follows the suffering of Christ: "In that day thee shall be a fountain opened in the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness... and one shall say unto him, What are these wounds in thine hands? Then he shall answer, Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends" (Zech. 13:1, 6). Hence, there can be no doubt about its reference to the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem and God's wrath upon the Roman Empire for persecution of the church. Malachi is to the same effect. Malachi passes over the earthly ministry of Christ, focusing instead upon his wrath against the Jewish nation:

⁴ Josephus, Wars, 5.3.1

⁵ Josephus, Wars, 5.13.7

“Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts...For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yes, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leaven them neither root nor branch...Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.” Mal. 3:1; 4:1, 5,6

We know that John the Baptist was the one who would come in the spirit and power of Elijah, to preach repentance and baptism, and prepare a people for Christ (Matt. 11:14; 17:10-13). It is therefore little wonder that John preached an imminent day of judgment:

“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance. but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Notice John’s statement that the ax was *already* laid to the root of the trees: the time of eschatological judgment had already commenced! The saints (the wheat) would be gathered into the eternal kingdom by martyrdom under Nero and the Jews; unbelieving Jews (the chaff) would be consumed in divine wrath; the Roman capital would be burned, and the empire suffer cataclysmic convulsions and judgments in the “year of four emperors” following Nero’s death. John was followed by Jesus, who also made numerous express statements placing the eschatological crisis within the lives of the generation that crucified him:

“For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works. Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.” Matt. 16:26-28

It is important to understand that the judgment began, not concluded, at Christ’s coming. This was the point at which Jesus sat upon the throne of his glory, and commenced the “great white throne” judgment portrayed in Matt. 25:31-46 and Rev. 20:11-15. Jesus said that all judgment has been given to him, because he is the Son of man (Jn. 5:27, 30). Daniel tied the Hadean resurrection to the destruction of Jerusalem, which Jesus indicated was soon to occur (Dan. 12:1, 2, 7; Jn. 5:25-29; cf. Rev. 11:1, 2, 15-19). Although Hades is now destroyed, Paul says we must “all appear” before the judgment seat of Christ to receive the things done in the body (II Cor. 5:10). Hence, the judgment spoken of here was not a “once for all” event, but the commencement of the judgment that will last as long as earth endures.

A few more quick references and we must conclude: At his trial before the Sanhedrin, when asked if he was the Son of God, Jesus answered:

“Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.” Matt. 26:64; cf. Mk. 14:62; Lk. 22:67-69

This is a clear reference to Dan. 7:13, 14, in which “one like the Son of man” ascends to heaven in clouds of glory, where he is given a kingdom, power, and glory, followed by his coming in wrath against the persecutors of the church (Dan. 7:21-27), there identified as the Roman power (the fourth world empire), but clearly also including the Jews, who were the moving force behind persecution of the saints (see generally the book of Acts, where the Jews opposed the gospel everywhere it was carried by Paul). The fulfillment of Jesus’ words that the Sanhedrin would witness his coming is recorded by Josephus, who says that the Zealots, shut up in the temple by the high priests, sent to the Idumeans to come to their assistance. However, the high priests shut the Idumeans out of the city. In revenge, when the Idumeans gained access to the city that night during a storm, they proceeded to slaughter 20,000 citizens, but especially sought out the high priests and members of the Sanhedrin, whom they slew, and cast out naked before the city walls.

“And I cannot but think that it was because God had doomed this city to destruction, as a polluted city, and was resolved to purge his sanctuary by fire, that he cut off these its great defenders and well-wishers, while those that a little before had worn the sacred garments, and had presided over the public worship, and had been esteemed venerable by those that dwelt on the whole habitable earth when they came into our city, were cast out naked, and seen to be the food of dogs and wild beasts.”⁶

Time Statements from the Epistles and Revelation

Having surveyed many of the time statements in the gospels, let us turn briefly to the epistles for what light they can shed upon the topic. Here we find that as we move closer toward the end of the first generation of believers, the language of imminence intensifies as Christ’s coming grew nearer:

I Thessalonians is, perhaps, the earliest of the epistles. Paul states that they are waiting for Christ’s

return, which is clearly understood to be in their lifetimes, but not in the immediate future:

“And to wait from his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come...For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.” I Thess. 1:10; 4:15-17

The “we which are alive and remain” mirrors Jesus’ statement in Matt. 16:26-28, saying that some of the disciples would not taste of death before the saw Christ coming in his kingdom to judge the living and dead (cf. II Tim. 4:1). It also mirrors Jesus’ word to Peter that the apostle John would live until Christ’s return (Jn. 21:20-23). Apparently, Paul’s words here were misunderstood to teach that those alive at Christ’s return would be translated to heaven without seeing death. Thus, the saying went around that the apostle John would not die (Jn. 21:23). But John denies this was Jesus’ meaning; therefore, we must not impute this meaning to Paul either. The word “then” is a conjunctive adverb showing sequence: The dead would be raised from Hades at Christ’s coming; *then* the living would be caught up together with them into glory. The word “together” does not signify the catching up occurs at the same *time*. This is the mistake some early believers made. Rather, “together” signifies they would be caught up together to the same *place*. Jesus’ word that they would not taste of death UNTIL they saw the Son of man coming, shows that they would in fact die. The “catching up” thus refers to a *post-mortem* translation of the soul or spirit to glory, not something that happens apart from physical death. In any event, it is quite clear that Paul and Thessalonians understood Christ would return in their lifetimes. II Thessalonians is to the same effect: The saints were being persecuted by their countrymen and the Jews,

⁶ Josephus, *Wars*, 4.5.1-3.

but would be saved out of their enemies' hand at Christ's coming. Paul says that the day is not immediately "at hand" but gives all the signs they were to watch for before it came (Claudius—the restrainer who restrained Roman and Jewish persecution of the church—would be taken out of the way; then Nero would be revealed as the man of sin and son of perdition by his persecution of the church, followed by the coming of Christ: II Thess. 2:1-8; cf. Dan. 7:21-27 where Nero is the "little horn" who persecutes the church for 3 ½ years).

The Corinthians were likewise waiting for the coming of the Lord, and expected Christ's return in their lifetimes (I Cor. 1:7, 8). Here, however, Paul tells them that the "time is short" and that marriage may therefore not be expedient, given the persecution and suffering that would proceed that day (I Cor. 7:29).

In Romans, the day had advanced so far as to be imminent: The night of persecution was "far spent," and the day of delivery was "at hand;" Christ would "shortly" bruise the adversary beneath their feet (Rom. 13:12; 16:20).

Peter, writing to the persecuted churches of Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, said that Christ was "ready" to judge the quick and the dead, and that the culmination of things prophesied was "at hand" (I Pet. 4:5, 7).

James said "the coming of the Lord draweth nigh...the judge standeth before the door" (Jm. 5:8, 9).

The author of Hebrews said it was a "very little while" (Gk. mikron oson oson) and he that cometh will come and will not tarry" (Heb. 10:37).

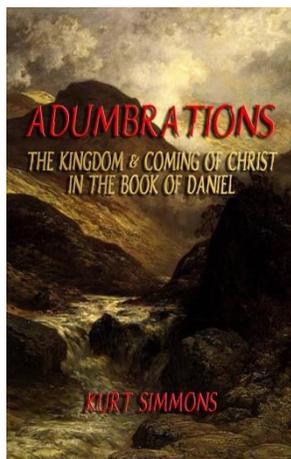
I John says the fact that there were many opposing Christ (antichrists) showed that it was then the "last hour" (Gk. escath wra).

Revelation opens and closes, saying, the things it contained must "shortly come to pass," the time was "at hand," and that Christ would come "quickly" (Rev. 1:1, 3: 22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20).

The only thing that remains a mystery is how anyone can believe that Christ has not come two thousand years later?

Conclusion

Futurism and Idealism are failed systems that have been repeatedly discredited down through the centuries. The foundational assumptions and observations of Preterism have the overwhelming weight of scripture supporting it them, and offer an immeasurably superior approach to understanding eschatology.



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Questions from our Readers

Q: Kurt, I'm working with a futurist fellow, trying to get him "converted" to preterism. He asked the following question:

"What about those still living at His return? Does the Bible not tell us that they will turn into their spiritual bodies 'in the twinkling of an eye'? This is concurrent to the second coming." I know Ed Stevens says that the rapture took place in 70AD. But how do we deal with that scripture?

A: Thanks for writing. The mistaken belief that those living when Jesus returned would be translated to heaven without seeing physical death, similar to Enoch and Elijah, was current in apostolic times. The gospel of John tells us that Jesus' word to Peter regarding John, "If I will that he remain until I come, what is that to thee?", led many to conclude John would not die (Jn. 21:20-23). However, John denies this was Jesus meaning entirely. Jesus did not say John would not die, only that he would remain until Christ's return.

The source of the mistaken idea that those alive when Christ returned would be translated appears to be Paul's words in I Thess. 4:15-17, and I Cor. 15:50-55, which your friend has evoked in your discussion. However, as John denies it was Jesus meaning that he would not die but be translated to heaven at Christ's return, we should not impute this meaning to Paul either. Otherwise we introduce a contradiction into scripture. Here is the text of I Thess. 4:15-17:

"And to wait from his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come...For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." I Thess. 1:10; 4:15-17

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Peter that the apostle John would live until Christ's return (Jn. 21:20-23). Apparently, Paul's words here were misunderstood to teach that those alive at Christ's return would be translated to heaven without seeing death. Thus, the saying went around that the apostle John would not die (Jn. 21:23). But John denies this was Jesus' meaning; therefore, we must not impute this meaning to Paul either.

The word "then" is a conjunctive adverb showing sequence: The dead would be raised from Hades at Christ's coming; *then* the living would be caught up together with them into glory. The word "together" does not signify the catching up occurs at the same time. The word "then" shows that it follows sometime *later*. The question is, How much later? Most assume that one follows the other almost instantaneously. However, this is the mistake some early believers made regarding John. Rather, "together" signifies they would be caught up together to the *same place*. If we said that so-and-so who lives in California got caught up in a political movement with other men who live in Florida in New York, would that necessarily mean they were all caught up in the movement at the same time? No, of course not. "Together" means only that they became involved in the *same movement*, without regard to the time each joined. In the same way, Paul's saying those alive would be caught up together with the dead in Christ means only that all would meet together *in glory*. Jesus' word in Matt. 16:27, 28 that they would not taste of death UNTIL they saw the Son of man coming, shows that they would in fact die. The "catching up" thus refers to a post-mortem translation of the soul or spirit to glory, not something that happens apart from physical death.

I Cor. 15:50-55 is somewhat more problematic. However the short answer is that the "last trumpet," which calls each of us out of this world at death, is NOT the same as the trumpet, whose sounding marked the resurrection of the dead. The distinction between these two trumpets is obscured in our English versions by mistranslation of the Greek. The translators assume the same trumpet is referred to, and so fail to preserve the definite and indefinite articles which distinguish them. The Greek in vv. 51, 52 reads:

"Behold, I show you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trump."

Thus, all those who were not "asleep" (dead in Hades) at Christ's return will be changed one-by-one as the last trumpet calls us out of this life at the time of physical death. The passage continues:

"For a trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed."

This is the place where our English versions change the Greek. The Greek says "a trumpet" shall sound. But our versions change this to read "the trumpet" shall sound, making the passage seem to refer back to "the last trumpet" of the preceding clause of the verse. However, the fact that the Greek uses the indefinite article "a trumpet" shows a different trumpet is here referred to.

To give an illustration, if we said "the president will address a joint session of Congress," we would know that the United States President is almost certainly referred to. Use of the definite article ("the") shows that a specific president is intended, which for Americans can only be the U.S. President. If we then continued, "for a president will give a speech, and a joint session of Congress will be addressed," it now becomes unclear who gives the speech, and if the "speech" is the same as the "address." If we then learned that the "speech" and the "address" did not occur at the same time, we would be forced to conclude that two presidents are referred to: "the President of the U.S." and "a president" (viz., the visiting president of some other country).

So with the trumpets. Since we know that the dead would be raised "first" (I Thess. 4:16), "then" the living will one-by-one be caught up to heaven at physical death, we are forced to conclude that more than one trumpet is contemplated, since both events are marked by a trumpet, but occur at different times. The Greek simply serves to corroborate this fact.

Q: I'm looking for your beliefs of what will happen to the earth. I am familiar with John Noe's view that the world will never end, but I would like to know your beliefs on the subject. Is there an article on your website that I could read concerning this?

A: Thanks for writing. The Bible is silent about when and how the physical cosmos will terminate. Science says that it will eventually wind down, but places this billions of years away. I have no opinion other than to say that nothing physical can be eternal, but is temporal by definition. Sorry I cannot offer more.

Q: You had indicated that the NIV is not the best version for getting a truer understanding as God initially intended. What English translation version would you suggest?

A: I use the KJV; the NKJV is pretty reliable too. The notes the NKJV uses reference the so-called "majority text," which is a modern made-up compilation that occurs nowhere, but is selected from various manuscripts and supposed "majority readings." However, a simple majority is not always a reliable answer to issues of textual criticism. There are some readings which are not witnessed by a majority of manuscripts, but which we have no reason to doubt the authenticity of. Acts 8:37, for example, and Philip's words to the eunuch "if thou believest with all thine heart thou mayest". This is not witnessed in the majority of manuscripts, but is almost certainly authentic. When we recall that there was a period during which baptism was postponed until Easter every year, the idea of instant baptism as Acts 8:37 teaches was resisted and the text suppressed by some well-meaning copyists, or at least they favored manuscripts that did not have it. But instant baptism upon a profession of faith is clearly the apostolic practice. Acts 17:33;18:18. Anyway, simply counting a majority is not always reliable, but, as I said, this just the notes in the NKJV. The text of the NKJV is Textus Receptus, which is what I believe to be the most sound. Stick with the Textus Receptus. I would recommend getting a copy of Dean John W. Burgon's book "The Revision Revised" and reading up it. It is a fascinating topic.

Q: You use the expression "Max Kingism". In what context and how does his teachings differ from yours? How would you define Max Kingism? (Is this also basically Don Preston's position?)

A: Yes, Max Kingism is essentially Don Preston's position. This position says that nothing arrived at the cross: not redemption; not atonement; not salvation from sin. This position delays receipt of all these until AD 70. Essentially, it claims that the law was still valid and hence held men under bondage of sin until "all was fulfilled" in AD 70 and the law was taken away. Thus, the law of Moses trumped the cross; it triumphed over grace. Salvation entered only by removal of the law, not the cross of Christ. I think this position is thoroughly refuted by scripture, which says that grace arrived at the cross and the law was taken away, and the debt of our sin "blotted out." (Col. 2:14).

The Bottomless Pit

By

Kurt Simmons

Among the imagery of Revelation, the bottomless pit holds a prominent place. The locust army bearing the image of “scorpion-centaurs” emerges from the pit. (Rev. 9:1ff) Also, the beast and dragon are shut up in the pit and rise from thence to make war on the saints (Rev. 11:7; 17:8; 20:1-3; 7-11). Because the pit is central in the imagery of Revelation, particularly to the millennial binding of the dragon and beast, it is important that we understand aright the meaning of this symbol.

Historical Antecedents and Associations

The bottomless pit first occurs in Rev. 9:1, 2 where it is portrayed as a great smoking cavern, debouching smoke and fumes from the bowels of hell:

“And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit. And he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the **smoke of a great furnace**; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit.” (Emphasis added)

The basic imagery of the *smoking furnace* hales from Genesis nineteen and the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah. Scripture records that God rained fire and brimstone upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, turning them to ash. In the morning, Abraham rose up and viewed the place where the cities had been “and lo, the smoke of the country went up as

the *smoke of a furnace*” (Gen. 19:28, emphasis added).

Sheol & the Pit

The overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah made a permanent impression upon the human psyche; all subsequent literature, pagan and divine, portray *hell* as a place of sulfurous fumes and continuous burnings, and probably derive from this source. Fire and brimstone became synonymous with the fate of the wicked. The basic imagery of Sodom’s overthrow is picked up and developed in the prophets where it becomes identified with *Sheol* (the place of the dead), the *pit*, and *destruction*. Concerning the king of Babylon Isaiah writes:

“*Hell* from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming; it stirreth up the dead for thee, even all the chief ones of the earth; it hath raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations...Thy pomp is brought down to the *grave*, and the noise of viols: the worm is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee...all the kings of the nations, even all of them, lie in glory, every one in his own house [sepulcher]. But thou art cast out of thy grave like an abominable branch, and as the raiment of those that are slain, thrust through with a sword, that go down to the stones of the *pit*” (Isa. 14:9-19, emphasis added).

Here, we see that hell (sheol), the grave, and the pit are closely related and involve the

idea of a subterranean realm to which the dead descend. There seems implicit in the language of a “pit” and “covering of worms” the notion of a mass burial site, similar to the *puticuli* - corpse-pits - of the Romans, where the bodies of criminals and those killed in the arena were carelessly flung to rot and putrefy. In other passages, the image of a mass funeral pyre is employed. Concerning the destruction of 185,000 soldiers of the Assyrian host by the angel of the Lord, Isaiah wrote:

"For through the voice of the Lord shall the Assyrian be beaten down, which smote with a rod...For **Tophet** is ordained of old; yea, for the king it is prepared; he hath made it **deep** and large: the pile thereof is **fire** and much wood; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of **brimstone**, doth kindle it" (Isa. 30:31-33; emphasis added; cf. Isa. 37: 36).

Gehenna, Fire & Worms

Tophet is another name for the valley of Hinnom (gehenna) and answers to the **lake of fire** and **second death**. (Cf. Matt. 10:28; Jam. 3:6; Rev. 19:20; 20:14, 15.) (The Old Testament makes no distinction between the temporary place of the lost in Sheol and their permanent destruction in Gehenna.) Tophet/Gehenna was a place outside of Jerusalem’s walls where the Israelites sacrificed their children to Molech (II Chron. 28:3, 33:6; Jer. 7:31; 19:2-6); it was later polluted by Josiah (II King 23:10) and afterwards made a place in which the refuse of the city was burnt. It was here that the Israelites buried and burned the 185,000 corpses of the Assyrian host, and for that reason became identified with the destruction and place of the lost. In a subsequent chapter, Isaiah refers to Tophet/Gehenna and the mass burial and

cremation of almost 1 million Jews who starved to death during the siege by Titus, saying, “their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched” (Isa. 66:24; cf. Mk. 9:44). The bodies of those who died in the siege were cast into Tophet beyond the city walls where they were eaten of fire and worms.⁷

In Ezekiel, **casting down** to the pit (Sheol) is a poetic reference to the destruction of an enemy army or nation. Ezekiel describes the fall of Tyre thus: “They shall bring thee down to the **pit**, and thou shalt die the deaths of them that are slain in the midst of the seas” (Ezek. 28:8; emphasis added). Concerning Assyria Ezekiel said: “I made the nations to shake at the sound of his fall, when I **cast him down to hell** with them that descend **into the pit**” (Ezek. 31:16; emphasis added). Other nations described by Ezekiel as being cast down to the pit also include Egypt, Elam, Meshec, Tubal, Edom, and Zidon (Ezek. 32:18, 22, 24, 26, 29, 30; cf. Isa. 14:9-23; 30:27-33).

Among the pagan poets and writers, the similarity of Revelation’s image of hell as a great smoking, cavernous, furnace is equally pronounced. Thus, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, an epic poem of the legendary founding of Rome, describes the underworld (*infernus*) as a pit, a deep cave, whose mouth gapes enormously, fuming up from its black throat lethal fumes to the vault of heaven, killing any bird that flies through its vapors. Hell itself has a place of blessing (Elysium) and a place of torments (Tartarus), engirdled by a burning stream and flaming torrent (see generally, lines 219-622). That the Greeks and Romans had partially correct conceptions about the after-life testifies to

⁷ Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, V, xii, 4; V, xiii, 7

that all men are derived from a common stock, which, at its genesis, received certain basic truths about life-after-death that were handed down and later corrupted by pagan writers.

In any event, it seems clear that both Jew and Gentile would have quickly recognized the imagery of Revelation's bottomless pit as referring to Sheol or Hades.

New Testament Testimony

The phrase translated "bottomless pit" is from the Greek *phreatos tes abyssou*, literally, "pit of the abyss." Where the term "abyss" occurs elsewhere in the New Testament it refers to *Hades*. Thus, in Luke 8:31, the unclean spirit in the Gadarean demoniac implored that he not be expelled into the abyss, or Tartarus, translated in our versions as "deep." Similarly, Paul speaks of Christ's death as involving a decent to the abyss, saying, "Who shall descend into the deep? [*Gk. abyssos*] (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead)" (Rom. 10:7).

Peter, in language very similar to Revelation's binding the dragon in the pit (Rev. 20:1-3) - indeed, its probable source - speaks of "angels" (probably the sons of Seth that sinned by marrying unbelieving women, Gen. 6:1-4), cast down to Tartarus, reserved under chains of darkness unto the judgment of the last day (II Pet. 2:4; cf. Jude 6). These same individuals Peter elsewhere refers to as spirits in *prison* (I Pet. 3:19). Therefore, Hades Tartarus was not only represented by the image of a smoking cavern or pit, but a prison for the lost pending final judgment.

Finally, Rev. 9:11 describes the king of the locust army by the names of Apollyon (Greek) and Abaddon (Hebrew), which mean **destruction** or **perdition**, also plain

references to Sheol. The eighty-eighth Psalm demonstrates best the relative identity of the pit, Sheol, and abaddon, or destruction:

"I am accounted with them that go down into the **pit**...free among the **dead**, like the slain that lie in the **grave**...Thou hast laid me in the lowest **pit**, in darkness, in the **deeps**...Shall thy loving kindness be declared in the **grave** [Sheol]? Or thy faithfulness in **destruction** [abaddon]?" (Ps. 88:4-11; emphasis added).

Thus, by both Old and New Testament sources, the bottomless pit is a clear reference to Sheol or Hades.

Significance of Symbology in Revelation

So much for the historical sources, what about the symbolism of Revelation? What is the meaning of the great smoking cavern depicted in Rev. 9, and the army it belches forth: Who is the king of the bottomless pit, and what are the keys he holds? And, finally, what is the meaning of the dragon and beast being bound in the pit and what historical reference is alluded to by their being loosed?

We believe that John's symbolism of the bottomless pit has a dual meaning. First, it is a *spiritual* symbol pointing to the *realm of heathendom*, or the *kingdoms of the panim (pagan nations)*. These people, who are also symbolized by the Mediterranean Sea, are associated with hell because they are "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). They have citizenship in hell in the same way believers have citizenship in heaven (Eph. 2:19; Phil. 3:20;

Col. 1:13). John therefore depicts the forces of heathendom as a vast army rising like smoke, debouched from the bowels of hell.

Keys are a symbol of power and authority. Jesus has the keys of hell and of death (Rev. 1:18), pointing to his power over the grave. He also possesses the key of David (Rev. 3:7; cf. Isa. 22:22), which signifies exclusive power to admit believers into the presence of the Father in heaven. In the same way, the key of the bottomless pit (Rev. 9:1) refers to authority over heathendom embodied in the Roman Empire. The king (angel) of the bottomless pit (Rev. 9:11) is the Roman emperor, Nero. Nero looses the **abomination of desolation** in the form of the Roman legions. It was under Nero that the Jews' 3 ½ year with Rome began. Nero commissioned Vespasian to undertake the campaign to crush the Jewish rebellion, which John portrays here as an invading army of locust-like men who devastate the land with sword and famine. The locusts are charged to hurt only those men that have not the seal of God in their foreheads (Rev. 9:4). This seal was placed on the 144,000 remnant sealed from the Jews by obedience to the gospel (Rev. 7:2ff), and therefore specifically points to God's wrath upon the Jews for refusing his offer of grace in Jesus Christ. The locusts have power to hurt men *five months* (v. 5). This seems to anticipate the siege of Jerusalem, which lasted from March/April to August/September, A.D. 70.

The second meaning attached to the bottomless pit points to Tartarus as a prison for the dead, the place where the defeated enemies of God were cast down, as we saw above in Ezekiel. Rev. 13:3 describes the beast (the persecutor of God's people) as having received a mortal wound (death-blow) to one of its heads. This death-blow caused the beast to be cast down into the

bottomless pit, together with the dragon (Rev. 20:1-3). There are two persecutions portrayed in Revelation, each lasted 3 ½ years or 42 months. The first is in chapter twelve and followed fast upon the heels of the ascension of the Man-child (Christ) to the throne of God. The second begins in Rev. 13 when the beast's mortal heals, and it ascends anew from the abyss. It was to strengthen and prepare the church against this latter persecution that Revelation was written. The first persecution was already past when John wrote. We submit the first refers to the persecution that arose over St. Stephen, and that the mortal wound to the persecuting beast was received upon this persecution's collapse. This occurred by the removal of Caiaphas from the high priesthood, Pilate's departure from Palestine, and the conversion of St. Paul about A.D. 37-38. After Paul's conversion, Luke reports "Then had the churches rest throughout Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied" (Acts 9:31).

The period of peace and stability represented by the dragon's and beast's confinement in the pit was enforced by Claudius Caesar's policy prohibiting persecution of the church, affording it protection of law (the *religio licita*; e.g. legally recognized religions). This same period is represented by the four angels holding the winds of heaven until the 144,000 were sealed, after which the Great Tribulation ensued (Rev. 7). The four angels are probably Claudius, the Roman president of Syria, the procurator of Judea, and King Agrippa II who acted to restrain Jewish persecution and keep the peace against those that were for rebellion and war. Claudius is "he who lets" and "what withholdeth" of II Thess. 2:6, 7. As long as Claudius was upon the throne, the church enjoyed the protection of

law. Claudius even banished the Jews from Rome for rioting against Christians (Acts 18:2; Suetonius, *Claudius*, XXV, 4). In Rev. 9, we saw that Nero had the keys of the pit and loosed the Roman legions to make war against the Jews. In Rev. 20:1-3, however, the keys (powers) of heathendom are held by another angel who restrains the dragon, binding it in Tartarus. Claudius is the angel of Rev. 20:1, which has the key of the bottomless pit to bind the dragon (the world civil power, imperial Rome), preventing it from persecuting the church. The thousand years speaks to the timeless nature of the spirit/hadean realm (*cf.* Ps. 90:4), and represents the period between the persecutions. Greco-Roman notions about hades had it that the dead remained there a thousand years, after which they were reincarnated to earthly life.⁸ This is exactly what happens with the dragon and beast.

Claudius would be removed and the “man of sin” and “son of perdition” (Apollyon/Nero) would come to the throne, and the church would come under empire-wide persecution. This is represented by the beast’s deadly wound being healed (Rev. 13:3, 14). The beast (and dragon) would rise anew from the pit to persecute God’s people and make war against the saints; a sort of antithesis of Christ’s resurrection to save his people from sin. The period during which the dragon and beast were confined to the pit is described, saying, the beast “was and is not and yet is and shall ascend out of the abyss” (Rev. 17:8; *cf.* 11:7). “Was” points to the earlier persecution under Caiaphas,

⁸ See our article “Revelation’s Millennia and Greco-Roman Notions of Hades.” The “first resurrection” (Rev. 20:4-6) symbolizes the souls of the righteous in hades paradise.

Pilate, and Saul (Paul); “is not” points to the period when John wrote during which the beast/dragon were prevented to persecute the church; “yet is” points to the fact that Jewish hatred for the church had not ceased to exist, but was merely repressed – “the mystery of iniquity” was restrained, but still at work (*cf.* II Thess. 2:7). “Shall ascend out of the abyss” points to the coming eschatological crisis when the beast would revive in the persecution under Nero. If Peter and Paul are the two witnesses (Rev. 11:3-10), then their deaths speak (v. 7) to their martyrdom at the conclusion of 3 ½ year period beginning with Paul’s imprisonment and trial before Nero. The deaths of Peter and Paul marked the outset of the persecution, which would last 3 ½ days (years), 42 months, or 1,260 days, or AD 64-68, when Nero died.

Conclusion

The bottomless pit is a reference to the hadean realm of the lost dead (Tartarus). In Revelation, the pit is a spiritual symbol of the realm of heathendom over which the Roman emperors sat as kings, holding the keys to the abyss. The pit is also a symbol of death and defeat of the church’s enemies during the period it is restrained to persecute the church; *viz.*, from Claudius to Nero.

