

Preterism & Biblical Prophecy

Is all prophecy already fulfilled?

by Fred G. Zaspel

Abstract

Preterism is a system of prophetic interpretation that understands virtually all of Biblical prophecy to be already fulfilled. The second coming of Christ and all attending events, the resurrection, etc., are all understood as now past. Christ has come, the kingdom has come, and the resurrection has occurred, all in a spiritual way. This brief paper provides a concise overview of how Biblical prophecy is fulfilled and this in light of the preterist claims.

The Nature of Prophetic Fulfillment

It has long been recognized that Biblical prophecy is normally fulfilled not in a single event but in a series of events which bring the prophecy to its final culmination. Seldom is the answer one-to-one but one-to-one, two, three, four, and so on. In the unfolding of redemptive history the prophecy is seen to take on a wider or more detailed significance. Older Bible teachers described this as "double" or "dual" fulfillment and as the "near view" and "far view" of prophecy. Interpreters today speak more in terms of *sensus plenior*, a phrase offered to describe the "fuller sense" seemingly given to certain OT prophecies as they are unfolded in the light of NT revelation. Others would prefer to speak in terms of a "canonical process" which develops more fully and more specifically the original sense and intent of the prophecy. More popularly, interpreters speak of the "now and not yet" aspect of Biblical prophecy, emphasizing that a given prophecy may well come to realization now yet await its fuller manifestation later; its fulfillment is both now and not yet. Arguments could be made for the precise accuracy of preferable terminology, but our point here is simply to notice that Biblical prophecy normally unfolds in a progressively fulfilling way. In the unfolding of redemptive history the prophecy is seen to take on a wider or more detailed significance.

Yes, there is the occasional one-to-one fulfillment. The Bethlehem prophecy (Mic.5:2) provides one example. But it is generally more complex than this, and examples in the prophetic Word abound. The very first prophecy sets the stage. The Champion promised to defeat the tempter finds initial realization in the earthly ministry of Jesus and His casting out of demons (Mat.12:28). By His casting out of demons, He Himself explains, Satan's kingdom is invaded and plundered. In Jesus God has come good on His promise to defeat the tempter. But there is obviously more to it than that. And again Jesus Himself says so. In anticipation of His death He declares, "Now is the prince of this world cast out" (Jn.12:). Here, in Jesus' death, Satan loses his head (cf. Heb.2). Here the promise finds its fulfillment. Or does it? Writing to the Roman believers Paul declares that God will "crush Satan under your feet shortly" (Rom.16:20). So we find the promise is fulfilled and "not yet" fulfilled. And of course Revelation 20 fills in the final details with Satan's bondage in the abyss and then finally being cast into the lake of fire forever. Here, at last, the prophecy is finally and fully fulfilled. But you see, the answer to the original promise was not one-to-one. The fulfillment came in a succession of events which brought the promise to its full consummation.

This is the Bible's first prophecy. And it stands as the pattern of the fulfillment of so many others. Moses' prophecy of a prophet like him to come (Dt.18:15ff) surely finds its answer in the long succession of Israel's prophets (see E. J. Young, *My Servants the Prophets*). God came good on His promise to provide continued direction for the nation of Israel in her land. But of course the prophecy is fully realized in Christ, the Prophet par excellence, the Son, the true revelation of God (Heb.1:1f). The prophecies of the coming of the Messiah unfold similarly. They may not have known it beforehand, but it is clear that the Messiah's coming is a two-stage event. There is the first coming and the second. At the first the promise was realized, but not until the second is it consummated. Indeed, the very promise of salvation is fulfilled "now" in Christ (Rom.5:1) but still awaits the people of God. It is presently realized but "not yet" fully manifested.

Antichrist provides another example. The details of Dan.11 so graphically portray Antiochus Epiphanes that critical scholars insist that "Daniel" wrote after the fact. Of course we deny their conclusion, but the prophecy's fulfillment in Antiochus is obvious. But then Jesus speaks of this "abomination" as yet future (Mat.24). As does Paul (2 Thes.2) and, (so it would seem from the many thematic parallels) John (Rev.13). And so the prophecy is fulfilled and yet is fulfilled again and is to be fulfilled still again, only more fully. But John tells us also that Antichrist "has come" (1Jn.4). He is the false teachers who lead men astray. So Antichrist "has come" and "will come." He is "now," and he is "not yet." As I say, examples of this abound, even in many of the OT prophecies which are already fulfilled. Prophecies of the destruction of great cities are fulfilled by the ruthless actions of some conqueror, and then again more fully by another.

The same is true in reference to the Kingdom. It came with the coming of Jesus. His Kingdom is "now." But He also taught us to pray, "Thy Kingdom come" (Mat.6:10). He taught that the Kingdom was future (Mat.7:21; 25:31ff etc.). Paul and the other NT writers regularly spoke of Christ's Kingdom as future (e.g., 2 Tim.4:1). The Kingdom, for Jesus and the apostles, was "now and not yet." Its fulfillment comes in stages. All of history is in the minds of the Biblical writers divided into two ages this age and the age to come. The age to come is the time of outpouring of Messianic blessing, and in the first coming of Jesus that age dawned. In Christ we are they

"upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1Cor.10:11). Yet while the writer to the Hebrews can speak of this time now as "these last days" (Heb.1:1-2), Paul speaks of "the last days" as still future to him (2Tim.3:1). There is both, the "now" and the "not yet," a present realization and a future manifestation. In other words, the prophecy is progressively fulfilled. Nor is it a mere "dual" prophecy. It is rather that the "sooner" realization is of a piece with the full and final manifestation of it. The single prophecy finds a progressive unfolding in stages.

I should not need to belabor the point any longer. This is enough to see that this matter of progressive fulfillment is standard issue in Biblical prophecy. It is not the exception but the rule. And it cannot be ignored. This simply must be borne in mind when seeking to interpret the prophetic Word, lest we take a mere part for the whole. The interpreter must be careful to be comprehensive in his study before announcing "this is that." Only when the prophecy is "full" is it "fulfilled." Due recognition of this principle is vital to accurate interpretation of the prophetic Word. Often it is the case that two sides of a prophetic debate, each with a part of the whole, make as though the whole were their "part." It's often so that neither side is wrong in what they are saying, except that they have only one half of the picture. But not until all the parts are together is there the whole. And again, we must not announce fulfillment until we are sure the prophecy has been filled.

Preterism & the Kingdom

Here is one basic flaw of preterism as I see it. Ironically, it is the same mistake made by the older dispensationalists who said there was no present realization of the Kingdom, only future. They wanted it all "not yet." Preterism wants it all "now." Both hold a part to be the whole. This flaw is evident in Preterism's understanding of the NT teaching that Jesus / the Kingdom will come "soon." This was Albert Schweitzer's observation, and it led him to conclude that Jesus was sadly mistaken. But does the NT lead us in this way? It does indeed announce that the Kingdom is "near" (eggizo; e.g., Mk.1:15). But it also makes the bold announcement of the presence of the Kingdom. In Jesus the Kingdom has not only "come near"; it has come (epthasen, Mat.12:28; cf., 11:11ff; Lk.17:21). Curiously, the preterist loves to emphasize the nearness of the Kingdom in the teaching of Jesus. But the problem is more difficult than that: Jesus taught not only that the Kingdom was near, but that it had come.

But Jesus speaks at least as clearly to the fact that there will be a "delay" before His coming, a delay of some duration. He spoke the parable in Luke 19:11-27 to explain this very thing. Luke gives us this interpretive clue when he says, "He spoke another parable because He was near Jerusalem and because they thought the Kingdom of God would appear immediately" (v.11). Jesus went on to speak not in terms of a short time but of a long journey to a "far country" for the purpose of "receiving His Kingdom" and to return to exercise the attending rights of it. Mat.24:45-51 speaks of enough time prior to His return that allows evil men to be slothful because of the "delay" (v.48; cf. Luk.12:45). Mat.25:5 speaks again of the Bridegroom "delaying." Mat.25:19 speaks of the Lord's return as "after a long time." James 5:7-8 is often cited to emphasize the impending nature of Christ's return, and so it does; but it also speaks of time, time for growing frustration which in turn demands that we "wait patiently." The delay is of such duration that scoffers are able to mock and deny it (2 Pet.3:1ff). "I will be with you unto the end of the age" (Mat.28:20) does lead one to think in terms of some duration of time, more than just a few years.

How then are we to relieve this tension? How can the Kingdom come both now and later? The preterist insists that Jesus taught it was "near" and from that he argues that the Kingdom came in its fullness in A.D. 70. He may well hold a part of the truth in referring to the arrival of the Kingdom then. But we must say from the evidence that this is not the whole of it. The Kingdom comes in stages. Now and later. Here and then, following a time of delay.

This, in turn, forces us to re-evaluate the claims that the prophecies of the "coming" of the Son of man and the "Kingdom" which are fulfilled in A.D. 70 are exhaustively fulfilled there (e.g., Mat.10:23; 16:27-28). It would indeed be difficult to miss the connection with the events of A.D. 70. The destruction of Jerusalem was an enormously significant event in the prophecies of the Gospels. Like the Babylonian captivity in the OT, it was of a piece with the day of the Lord. There is a theological unity. But that it was the exhaustive fulfilling of that Day demands exegetical demonstration, and it is here that preterism fails. In holding that A.D. 70 exhausts the Kingdom and coming prophecies preterism dilutes much of the ideas contained in many of these prophecies.

For example, preterism is correct in that the Kingdom is a spiritual Kingdom (Mat.12:28; 21:43; 23:13; Lk.17:20-21; etc.) And it is correct in that it is an earthly Kingdom (Mat.5:5; 8:11-12; Lk.19:11ff; 1Cor.15:22-28). But it does not go far enough with either consideration. The rule of the Kingdom is universal and one that is much more evident that it is today. A rule in which the will of God is everywhere perfectly done, admitting no rebellion. It involves a separation among men in which those who have followed the words of Christ continue in blessedness, and those who have not are destroyed in judgment (Mat.7:21ff; cf. Mat.8:11-12). This fullness of the Kingdom is preceded by the destruction of the wicked "at the end of this age" (Mat.13:38-42) and is characterized by the righteous "shining forth as the sun" in their absence (v.43). "This age" continues with its mix of evil and righteous, but in the Kingdom the evil are cast out (Mat.13:47-50). To be a part of His Kingdom is a future blessing of reigning with Christ which follows this time of difficulty in discipleship (Mat.19:27-29) "leaving all to follow Him" is for this age, and it is followed by reward in His Kingdom. This age runs its course

as "this present evil age" (Gal.1:4), while believers do indeed enjoy a share in the Kingdom "ahead of time." But the fullness of the Kingdom awaits the return of our Lord from Heaven (1Cor.15:23-28). In short, some of the data suggests a present Kingdom. Some of the data suggests a future Kingdom. All the data together demands both.

Preterism & the Second Coming of Christ

Preterism fails in this regard also as it argues that the hope of Christ's return was likewise fulfilled in A.D. 70. To be sure, the destruction of Jerusalem was a "coming" of Christ in predicted judgment. But that it was "this same Jesus coming again in like manner as you have seen him go up into heaven" (Acts 1:11) is extremely difficult to conceive. Indeed, if it were, words would seem to have lost all meaning. "We shall see Him as He is" and so be "like Him" (1Jn.3:2) would appear misleading if A.D. 70 exhausted it. "Every eye shall see Him" (Rev.1:7) and "then shall you see" Him in His return coming "in great glory on the clouds of heaven" (Mat.24:30) in the company of all His saints (1Th.4:16f; Rev.19:11ff) and heralded by angels (1Th.4:16) in an event so spectacular that it cannot possibly be missed (Mat.24:26-27) and "coming again to receive you unto myself, that where I am there you may be also (Jn.14:3) all very naturally lead one to expect a personal, visible return as traditionally yes, unanimously understood by the saints throughout the church age. Indeed, to hear the preterist arguing that "Christ really did come in A.D. 70" reminds one of those against whom Jesus warned (Mat.24:26-27) (to paraphrase) "if they have to tell you I have come, rest assured that I haven't. Like the lightning, you won't be able to miss it." Those who try to convince us that Christ has come, announce by that very action that they are false teachers.

There is much that makes the preterist position difficult to believe. To say that the coming in judgment in A.D. 70 exhausts the blessed hope destroys the analogy of the first advent, it misses the overall pattern of prophetic fulfillment, it renders plain words mysterious and ethereal, & it plainly falls under the denial of our Lord Himself in Mat.24:26-27.

Preterism & the Resurrection

It is a curious thing that the over-realized eschatology of Corinth has re-surfaced in preterism. The ancient denial of the resurrection of the body may have been grounded in good Greek philosophy, but it was a denial of the essentials of the gospel (1Cor.15). In 1Cor.15 Paul explains something of the resurrection body, that it will be both different from and yet continuous with this body (vv.35-50). And whatever the differences, the body buried is the body raised (vv.42-44). So important is this that Paul hinges the truth of the gospel on it (vv.12ff). If Jesus did not experience bodily resurrection, then there is nothing left to preach, and we have no hope. But of course, "Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (v.20). He did not remain in the grave; nor shall we.

This of course was one point of issue between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees affirmed the coming resurrection, the Sadducees denied it. Paul at times positioned himself with the Pharisees in this matter (Acts 23:6-8), thus showing his own belief in the physical resurrection. But more than agreeing that a physical, bodily resurrection was to come, he boldly announced that in Jesus it had already taken place (Acts 4:1-2). Jesus arose, and not in a merely spiritual sense; His tomb became empty. And for this preaching he was mocked by the Greeks of his day (Acts 17:32), but undaunted he continued both to teach and to strive to be a part of that "out resurrection from out of the dead" (ten exanastasin ten ek nekron, Phil.3:11). His hope was to be part of that resurrection of the just "from the dust of the earth" (Dan.12:2).

Preterist denials of the bodily resurrection are as old as the Corinthian error, but they are no more valid today than then. To affirm that we are living in the resurrection today is, again, to take a mere part for the whole. In the resurrection there is no marriage (Luk.20:35). Family relationships as we know them will be then past a detail difficult indeed to reconcile with preterism's idea of present resurrection. To render Paul's hope of the resurrection purely spiritual renders his words and much of his persecutions (e.g., Acts 4:1-2; 23:6) meaningless. Worse, it makes him a liar (1Cor.15:15). "But shun profane and vain babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like a cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some" (2Tim.2:16-18). In Paul's opinion, this preterist doctrine is a particularly dangerous one.

Preterism & 2 Peter 3:8

It has been suggested (by preterists) that it is inconsistent or rather gratuitous to appeal to 2Pet.3:8 to explain the "delay" in Christ's return. "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day." But it must be noted that this is Peter's own explanation. The preterist argues that since Christ spoke of the "nearness" of His coming it must be that He has already come. The scoffers whom Peter addressed argued that the same evidence indicated that He will not come at all. And it is Peter's answer that leads us to think in terms of God's view of time. "For God, it's not been long at all!" This is an entirely legitimate argument. It has inspired apostolic endorsement.

Preterism & Matthew 24

Mention of Mat.24:26-27 has already been made, that Jesus warns us against those who come to us and say that He has already returned. But there is more in the Olivet discourse that could be noted briefly here. That in the

Olivet discourse Jesus has a close eye to the events of A.D. 70 is clear. But that it is exhausted there is not at all clear. The issue at hand is the the destruction of the temple, yes, but also the "coming" of Christ & "the end of the age." The disciples were clearly wanting to know of Jesus' return to them. This He had promised them (Jn.14:3), and they wanted to know more about it. Against that backdrop it would be difficult to limit Jesus' "coming" language to the events of A.D. 70; indeed, it would seem to render Jesus' reply misleading. To refer it exclusively to the destruction of Jerusalem is just too much special pleading. It would never be the first reading of the passage, and for this reason alone, the preterist interpretation has never been very convincing. The first and most natural way of reading the passage is not likely the wrong one. Similarly, talk of great cosmic disturbances involving the sun, moon, and stars would appear relatively meaningless and / or misleading if limited to the events of Jerusalem.

Similarly, the danger to "all flesh" (Mat.24:22) is too broad a statement to restrict it to Jerusalem. The preterist admits as much when he comes to v.30 the "mourning" of "all flesh," for the preterist, is global in significance. One more. In Mat.24:21 Jesus cites Dan.12:1, and Dan.12:2 explicitly establishes the time frame as that of physical resurrection "from the dust of the earth." To say this refers to this day of spiritual resurrection just will not do. Therefore, the traditional understanding of Mat.24 as referring to a literal and visible return of Christ to the earth, "immediately after the tribulation of those days" is the correct one. It speaks, of a yet to be experienced time of danger and trouble which is of a piece with and foreshadowed in the events of A.D. 70 (vv.15-22), a day of false teachers and apostasy and even supernatural phenomena (vv.23-25) and false announcements that Christ has already come (vv.26-28), following which Christ will return "on the clouds with power and great glory" (vv.29-31).

Conclusion

So yes, Christ came. Yes His Kingdom was established with Him. Yes, He came in judgment in A.D. 70. And yes, that was a great milestone in the progressive manifestation of His kingdom. And yes, He is still coming. He remains the object of our most blessed hope.

Word Of Life Baptist Church Web Site - COPYRIGHT 1996 Fred Zaspel

Dual Fulfilment of Prophecy

About one-third of the Bible is prophecy. Much of it has more than one fulfilment. Are there any principles which help us in seeing how a prophecy might be fulfilled more than once? Here are three ways in which Bible prophecies can be fulfilled more than once.

A typical fulfilment first

Some Bible prophecies have their complete fulfilment in the long term, but in the short term there is a partial fulfilment in events which are types of the complete fulfilment.

Example. The promises to David are quoted with reference to Solomon; compare: 1 Chronicles 17:12,13 with 22:9,10. This is because Solomon's reign was a type of Christ's Kingdom; compare 1 Kings 4:25 with prophecies of the Kingdom in Jeremiah 23:6 and Micah 4:4. However, their complete fulfilment comes with Christ; see Luke 1:32,33 and Acts 13:33.

Other examples. Micah 4,5 was initially fulfilled by Hezekiah in relation to the Assyrian invasion, but will be more completely fulfilled by Christ setting up the Kingdom. Some features of Psalm 72 were fulfilled by Solomon's kingdom, but the psalm will be completely fulfilled in the future reign of Christ.

A typical fulfilment later

Some Bible prophecies are fulfilled completely initially but this fulfilment is typical of something greater to come.

Example. Isaiah 17 was fulfilled in the Assyrian invasion in Hezekiah's time, culminating in the destruction of the Assyrian host (v. 14). Yet this fulfilment is also typical of the host which invades the land at the time of Christ's return, and is destroyed.

Other examples. Jeremiah 50 and 51 are prophetic of the overthrow of the kingdom of Babylon, but the extensive use of the language of these chapters in Revelation 17 and 18 shows that this overthrow was typical of the overthrow of spiritual Babylon at Christ's return. Psalm 41 (not strictly prophecy) is about David's experiences in the revolt of Absalom, but his betrayal by Ahithophel is typical of Judas's betrayal of Christ (v. 9, quoted in John 13:18).

Prophecies fulfilled on a number of occasions

Some Bible prophecies are fulfilled on several occasions because of situations which keep occurring.

Example. Deuteronomy 28:49 prophesies of "a nation . . . from far" which God would send against Israel if they forsook Him. Note how the terms of this verse were fulfilled by Assyria (Isa. 5:26; 33:19; Hos. 8:1) and Babylon (Jer. 4:13; 5:15) as well as Rome (Mt. 24:28).

Other examples. Cannibalism, prophesied in Leviticus 26:29, is recorded in both 2 Kgs. 6:26-31 and Lamentations 4:10, and according to Josephus occurred in A.D. 70. The opposition to Christ by rulers foretold in Psalm 2:1-3 occurred at his birth (Mt. 2) and his crucifixion (Acts 4:25-28), and will occur at his Second Coming (Rev. 17:12-14) and at the end of the Millennium (20:7-10).

Source: The Testimony Magazine