

# The Fallacy of Preterism



*Dr. David R. Reagan*

Preterism is a system for the interpretation of the book of Revelation. Its strange name comes from a Latin word meaning past tense. The word is appropriate because this view holds that either all or most of the book of Revelation was fulfilled in the First Century!

## The Origin of the Viewpoint

The view was developed in the 17th Century by a Jesuit priest named Luis de Alcazar (1554-1613). His purpose was to defend the Catholic Church against the attacks of the Reformers. He denied the Reformers' charge that the book of Revelation was a prophecy about the apostasy of the Roman Church. Instead, he argued that the book was a prophecy about the Church's struggles during its early years. Chapters 4 through 11 were interpreted as depicting the Church's fight against Judaism, culminating in the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Chapters 12 through 19 were viewed as the Church's struggle against paganism, ending with the fall of Rome in 476. Chapters 20 through 22 were interpreted to be a symbolic description of the glories of papal Rome. Using this clever approach,

Alcazar was able to limit the range of Revelation's prophecies to the first 500 years of the Christian Era.

Alcazar was a mild Preterist. A more radical form of Preterism gained popularity in the latter part of the 20th Century and is today the most widely held version of this interpretive approach. It sees nearly all the prophecies of Revelation as fulfilled in the 70 A.D. destruction of Jerusalem, except for the resurrection of believers and the Second Coming of Jesus. It assigns the Tribulation to the fall of Israel, the great apostasy to the First Century Church, and the last days to the period between Jesus' ascension and the destruction of Jerusalem. The beast is viewed as a symbol of Nero in particular and the Roman Empire in general. The False Prophet is equated with the leadership of apostate Israel. Needless to say, many of the spokesmen for this viewpoint are anti-Semitic.

There is a more extreme form of Preterism whose advocates consider themselves to be "consistent Preterists." They take the position that all so-called "end time prophecy" was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. -- including the Second Coming and the resurrection of believers! They do not look forward to any future resurrection or any end of history. They believe we are currently living in the eternal state.

## The Cornerstone of the Viewpoint

The cornerstone of the Preterist position is a belief that the book of Revelation was written before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. This belief flies in the face of strong evidence to the contrary.

The internal evidence of the book regarding the Roman Empire and the external testimony of the Church Fathers both point to a date of authorship around 95 A.D., 25 years after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

The type of widespread Roman persecution of the Church that is pictured in Revelation did not occur until the reign of Domitian (81 - 96 A.D.). The persecutions of Nero were limited to the area of Rome. One of the Church Fathers, Irenaeus (c. 130 - c. 202), wrote that the book of Revelation was authored by the apostle John "toward the end of Domitian's reign." Irenaeus was

discipled by Polycarp (c. 70 - c. 155 A.D.) who, in turn, had been discipled directly by John himself.

## References to the Temple

One of the arguments for an earlier date is based on a reference to the Temple in Revelation 11:1-2. John is told to measure the Temple, which in this case seems to be a command to assess the Temple's spiritual condition. This reference to the Temple, it is argued, must mean that the book was written before the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D.

But this argument ignores the fact that the Scriptures teach there are going to be two future Temples, one during the Tribulation which the Antichrist will desecrate (Daniel 9:27 and 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4), and another during the Millennium which Jesus Christ will consecrate (Ezekiel 40-46).

The Temple mentioned in Revelation 11 must be the Tribulation Temple since the passage says it will be trampled down by the Gentiles for 42 months (the last half of the Tribulation). It also says this will be immediately preceded by the testimony of the two witnesses for 1,260 days (the first half of the Tribulation).

## An Eclectic Observation

I can agree with the Preterists when they insist that the book of Revelation contained a message of encouragement to First Century Christians, assuring them that the Church would ultimately triumph over the Roman Empire. I can also relate to the Reformation Historicists when they argue that the prophecies of Revelation relate to the corruption of the Roman Church and its persecution of true believers.

In other words, I believe the book of Revelation has always had a continuing relevance as a source of encouragement to suffering Christians throughout the history of the Church. It has always served as a reminder that the Church will ultimately triumph over all its oppressors.

That's why I can even agree with the liberal, Idealist viewpoint when it argues that the ultimate message of the book is that good will triumph over evil. How

can anyone argue with that conclusion when the book clearly teaches that Satan will be crushed and Jesus will emerge totally triumphant?

But I also believe in the Futurist view that most of the book of Revelation is yet to be fulfilled and is to be fulfilled in its plain sense meaning. In other words, I believe there's going to be a real Antichrist and not just a symbolic Antichrist. Yes, there have been symbolic antichrists in the past, but there is going to be a fulfillment in a literal Antichrist in the future. I also believe the Tribulation, Millennium and Eternal State are all yet future.

## Relating the Views to Each Other

As I look at these four systems of interpretation (Historicist, Preterist, Idealist, and Futurist) and consider their relationship to each other, I am reminded of how an overhead projector works. You can put a transparency on the projector that shows the land of Israel in the time of Joshua. Then you can lay on top of that transparency another one that shows the boundaries of the land at the time of Jesus. Another overlay could show the land's boundaries during the time of the Crusaders. A final overlay could outline the boundaries as they exist today. Each transparency contains an element of truth about the land. The light shines through all the transparencies to give you the full picture, showing you how the boundaries have changed over the years.

I think that's the way these schools of interpretation relate to each other. Each one of the four contains an element of truth. The problem comes when you accept only one and reject all the others. We must never forget that the book of Revelation contained a very relevant message to First Century Christians. It assured them of their ultimate victory over the Roman Empire. We must also remember that the book has been given relevant application to the struggles of the Church throughout history.

## Looking to the Future

But we must also keep in mind that the Futurist view is correct when it says that the ultimate fulfillment of the book's prophecies is yet future.

There really is going to be a seven year period of Tribulation. A Jewish temple is going to be rebuilt in Jerusalem. A real person empowered by Satan will march into that temple, blaspheme God, and declare himself to be a god. This Antichrist will become the scourge of the earth. He will attempt to exterminate the Jewish people. Just as he appears to be on the verge of victory in accomplishing this satanic goal, the Lord Jesus will break from the heavens with all His holy ones, returning to the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem from which He ascended into Heaven. The Lord will crush the Antichrist and inaugurate the greatest kingdom the world has ever known. The earth will be flooded with peace, righteousness and justice -- as the waters cover the sea.