

## JESUS: A PRETERIST OR A FUTURIST?\*

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*This essay examines Dr. R. C. Sproul's thesis in The Last Days According to Jesus,<sup>1</sup> that moderate preterism as it relates to Christ's second coming is convincingly proven by three time-indicators in the Gospels<sup>2</sup> and the writing date for John's Revelation.<sup>3</sup> The essay evaluates each of these four time referents historically and/or exegetically in order to determine if Sproul's claims can be biblically substantiated. The three Matthean time-frame references have better alternative interpretations (both before and after A.D. 70) in regard to time of fulfillment than the A.D. 70 date, which preterism requires of all three. Also, the late writing date for Revelation (mid-90s) has the preponderance of evidence on its side; this one conclusion alone invalidates postmillennial preterism. Since these time-indicators that are critically important to the preterist position do not support the system's foundational claim that Christ's parousia occurred within the lifetime of His disciples, this reviewer<sup>4</sup> concludes that Scripture does not teach preterism, moderate or otherwise, as claimed by Dr. Sproul. Therefore, Jesus was a futurist in regard to biblical prophecies of His second coming.*

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\*This article has been expanded from a paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Danvers, Massachusetts on November 17, 1999.

<sup>1</sup>R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus: When Did Jesus Say He Would Return?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 24-25. They include Matt 10:23; 16:28; 24:34.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 131-49.

<sup>4</sup>Other reviews of Dr. Sproul's volume include Meredith G. Kline, "Book Review," *Kerux: A Journal of Biblical-Theological Preaching* 14 (1999):52-70; Robert P. Lightner, "Book Reviews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (1999):242-43; and Mike Stallard, "Review of The Last Days According to Jesus," Pt. 1, *The Conservative Theological Journal* 6 (2002): 55-71 and Pt. 2, 6 (2002):184-202.

The English word “preterist” comes from the Latin term *praeteritus* which basically means “past” in regard to time. Thomas Ice explains that there are three types of preterists/preterism.

It is important to realize that there are three kinds of preterism that I have labeled as (1) mild; (2) moderate; and (3) extreme. Mild preterism holds that the Tribulation was fulfilled within the first three hundred years of Christianity as God judged two enemies: the Jews in A.D. 70 and Rome by A.D. 313; but adherents still look for a future Second Coming. Moderate preterism, which is the position of Dr. Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., sees the Tribulation and the bulk of Bible prophecy as fulfilled in events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70; but they still hold to a future Second Coming, a physical resurrection of the dead, an end to temporal history, and the establishing of the consummate new heaven and new earth. Extreme or consistent (as they like to call themselves) preterism believes that the Second Coming, and thus the resurrection of believers, is all past. For all practical purposes all Bible prophecy has been fulfilled, and we are beyond the millennium and even now in the new heaven and new earth. They believe that if there is an end of current history it is not recorded in the Bible.<sup>5</sup>

J. Stuart Russell,<sup>6</sup> whom Sproul quotes frequently and favorably with regard to time-indicators,<sup>7</sup> was unquestionably an extreme or radical preterist who believed that the general resurrection of the dead spoken of in the NT occurred before A.D. 70.<sup>8</sup> With the exception of radical preterists themselves, all other preterists and all conservative non-preterists consider this Hymenaen/Philetean doctrine of extreme preterism (cf. 2 Tim 2:18) to be heretical.<sup>9</sup> In fairness to Dr. Sproul, it must be pointed out that he rejects radical preterism.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999) 7. Sproul, *The Last Days* 25, distinguishes between only two kinds—moderate and radical.

<sup>6</sup>J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second Coming* (London: Daldy, Isbister, 1878; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983, 1999).

<sup>7</sup>Sproul, *The Last Days* 24-25.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 159-65. Sproul distances himself from Russell's full preterism.

<sup>9</sup>Ice and Gentry, *The Great Tribulation* 7; John F. MacArthur, *The Second Coming: Signs of Christ's Return and the End of the Age* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1999) 13; Stallard, “A Review” 56-57; Dennis M. Swanson, “Reformation or Retrogression? An Examination of the International Preterist Association's Claims and Methodology” (unpublished paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Toronto, Canada on November 22, 2002) 25.

<sup>10</sup>Sproul, *The Last Days* 159, 203: “The great weakness of full preterism—and what I regard to be its fatal flaw—is its treatment of the final resurrection.”



### Background

Both Sproul and Russell (plus others of their general persuasion) have proposed that only their preterist understanding of Jesus' statements regarding His parousia being fulfilled in A.D. 70 rescues the Bible from the liberal's charge of "errant" and "unreliable."<sup>11</sup> Or, put another way, without the preterist view of NT prophecy being fulfilled in A.D. 70, the Scriptures are proven highly suspect or even guilty of substantial error, especially in matters relating to biblical eschatology.

Referring to the Olivet Discourse in his foreword to the reprint of Russell's book, Sproul states,

Though critics grant that Jesus' prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction was correct, they insist that his predictions at the same time, in the same context, and within the same time-frame reference, of his parousia, were incorrect. This poses a higher problem for those with a high view of Scripture and Jesus. An error in Jesus' forecast of his parousia would be fatal to historic Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

Sproul writes elsewhere,

From the Enlightenment onward, the church has been gripped by a severe crisis regarding the trustworthiness of Scripture.... Due to the crisis in confidence in the truth and authority of Scripture and the subsequent crisis regarding the real historical Jesus, eschatology must come to grips with the tensions of time-frame references in the New Testament.<sup>13</sup>

As I have indicated throughout this book, one of my overarching concerns regarding the points in dispute is the authority of Scripture. As the inerrant Word of God, it precludes all efforts to ignore or downplay any aspect of its teaching. The evangelical world cannot afford to turn a deaf ear to the railing voices of skepticism that gut Scripture of its divine authority, that assault the credibility of the apostolic witness and even of Christ himself. We must take seriously the skeptics' critique of the time-frame references of New Testament prophecy, and we must answer them convincingly.<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Sproul strives to answer the objections to biblical prophecy of such critics as Bertrand Russell and Albert Schweitzer.<sup>15</sup> One almost gets the idea that he is bordering on a kind of theodicy in his quest to protect the Scriptures from its unbelieving detractors. He certainly appears to be engaging in a Hal Lindsey-type

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 11-26.

<sup>12</sup>Russell, *The Parousia* ix.

<sup>13</sup>Sproul, *The Last Days* 26.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 203.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 12-24.

approach to biblical prophecy by reading or placing historical events—e.g., those of A.D. 70—into Scripture just as Lindsey does with contemporary events. To reach sound conclusions in interpretive labor, one must meticulously avoid both critical objections and a Lindsey-type approach.<sup>16</sup>

The advocates of preterism appear to have missed, or at least undervalued, Peter's reminder that in the days prior to A.D. 70 there also were scoffers similar to Russell and Schweitzer. Instead of foretelling the events of A.D. 70, just a few years away, Peter encourages them to wait in faith, believing that all will eventually happen in God's timing, which is different from man's timetable (2 Pet 3:3-4, 8-9). Attempting to answer objections from skeptics is no way to validate or elevate a particular eschatological system.

Both J. Stuart Russell and R. C. Sproul have tried to prove preterism to be the correct time-framework for understanding biblical prophecy, which time-frame then becomes the supposed savior of Scripture's integrity. Russell appeals to three distinct declarations of the Lord respecting the time of His coming (Matt 10:23; 16:28; 24:34). He states, "The plain grammatical meaning of these statements has been fully discussed in these pages. No violence can extort from them any other sense than the obvious and unambiguous one, viz. that our Lord's second coming would take place within the limits of the existing generation."<sup>17</sup>

Sproul affirms Russell's assessment:

The central thesis of Russell and indeed of all preterists is that the New Testament's time-frame references with respect to the parousia point to a fulfillment within the lifetime of at least some of Jesus' disciples.<sup>18</sup>

The purpose of *The Last Days According to Jesus* has been to examine and evaluate the various claims of preterism, both full and partial. The great service preterism performs is to focus attention on two major issues. The first is the time-frame references of the New Testament regarding eschatological prophecy. The preterist is a sentinel standing guard against frivolous and superficial attempts to downplay or explain away the force of these references.<sup>19</sup>

J. Stuart Russell argues that 99 persons in every 100 would immediately understand Jesus to mean that the events he was predicting would fall within the limits of the lifetime of an existing generation. This means, not that every person present will necessarily be

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<sup>16</sup>Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church*, 4th rev. ed. (Atlanta: American Vision, 1999) vii; Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1999) 237-38.

<sup>17</sup>Russell, *The Parousia* 539-40.

<sup>18</sup>Sproul, *The Last Days* 26.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 202-3.

alive at the time of the fulfillment, but that many or even most will be.<sup>20</sup>

This essay will show that an understanding of the “time-frame references” or “time-text indicators” different from that of preterism does not necessarily involve (1) violent extortion of the text’s meaning, (2) frivolous interpretive efforts, or (3) superficial exegesis. Nor do other eschatological approaches necessarily downplay or explain away the meaning or the importance of these supposed watershed texts in determining one’s prophetic views. Preterism is not necessarily the only eschatological paradigm or the *a priori* superior approach to serve as the apologetic approach of choice when supporting or defending the impeccable character of Scripture, as Dr. Sproul asserts. Though we commend and agree wholeheartedly with Dr. Sproul in his strong stand for a high view of Scripture, championing preterism is not the best way to achieve that goal.

To demonstrate this, the following discussion will briefly examine the four time-indicators by which preterism, not the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture, lives or dies. They are: (1) the writing date of Revelation; (2) Matt 10:23; (3) Matt 16:28; and (4) Matt 24:34. The examination will demonstrate that (1) Jesus was a futurist, not a preterist and (2) sound exegesis is the best defender of Scripture’s integrity, not the presuppositions of a particular eschatological system.

### **The Writing Date of Revelation**

Regarding possible writing dates for Revelation, Bible scholars generally recognize two possibilities. First, the *early* date is shortly before A.D. 70 (ca. A.D. 68) during Nero’s reign (A.D. 54-68).<sup>21</sup> Second, the *late* date would be ca. A.D. 95 during Domitian’s time (A.D. 81-96).<sup>22</sup>

Significantly, a futurist would not have to change his eschatological thinking if a pre-A.D. 70 date for the writing were to be established. However, the preterist position is eliminated from consideration if the late date of ca. A.D. 95 can

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>21</sup>Albert A. Bell, Jr., “The Date of John’s Apocalypse,” *New Testament Studies* 25 (1978):93-102; Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*, 3d ed. (Atlanta: American Vision, 1999); John A.T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); J. Christian Wilson, “The Problem of the Domitianic Date of Revelation,” *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993):587-605.

<sup>22</sup>D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 473-76; Adela Yarbro Collins, “Dating the Apocalypse of John,” *Biblical Research* 26 (1981):33-45; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1970) 947-59; Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 472-75; H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah, 1988) 249-60; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7* (Chicago: Moody, 1992) 20-23; “Theonomy and the Dating of Revelation,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 5 (1994):185-202.

be validated.<sup>23</sup>

All discussions of Revelation's writing date are divided into two categories of evidence—internal and external. Regarding internal evidence, this writer has foregone any discussion in this essay for two reasons. First, it is too voluminous a subject for an essay of this size. Second, Revelation contains no direct statements as to its writing date. Therefore, the subjectivity that could be introduced through biased eisegesis (by both positions) would generally skew the discussion and would not be decisive. Put another way, because of the frequent use of figurative language in Revelation, one could easily read one's prophetic choice into the interpretation to prove his historical and/or theological conclusions. On a matter of this importance, it is best to avoid those kinds of questionable speculations and look at the more objective witness of history. Theorizing and hypothesizing one's way to a conclusion proves highly unsatisfactory, regardless of one's eschatological leanings.

Therefore, several salient points of external evidence are relevant. First, the history of dating Revelation decidedly favors the late date. From the second through the eighteenth centuries, the late date was essentially the exclusive view. Only in the nineteenth century, when postmillennialism was a dominant influence, did the early date enjoy a brief time as the majority view. Certainly in the last two centuries, the late date has rebounded to its former place of prominence. Though challenged by a few in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the vast majority of Christian scholars support the later date, regardless of their eschatological beliefs.

Second, only direct statements from primary sources should be considered. At least four direct witnesses in the second to fourth centuries A.D. support the late date.<sup>24</sup> However, only several obscure sixth-century witnesses and the ninth-century writer, Theophylact, advocate the early date. The earliest historical attestation to Revelation's date of writing clearly supports the late date. A general axiom states that ancient documents whose date is closest to the historical event reported contain more accurate and reliable information than documents further removed in time.

Third, the historical conditions of the seven churches of Asia Minor in Revelation 2–3 point to a late date. The status of the churches is radically different from the immediate post-Pauline days of the late 60s.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, that they represent churches much later than the 60s is the reasonable conclusion, thus eliminating a pre-A.D. 70 writing date for Revelation.

Fourth, if Christ's parousia had actually occurred in conjunction with Jerusalem's fall, it was certainly to be expected that John would then have taught

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<sup>23</sup>Gentry acknowledges that a late writing date for Revelation would be fatal to the preterist position in *Before Jerusalem Fell* 342.

<sup>24</sup>Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.30.3; Victorinus, *Common Apocalypse* 7:353; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.18.3; 5.8.6; and Jerome, *Ag. Jovinianum* 1.26.

<sup>25</sup>See Thomas, "Theonomy" 200-201 for a most convincing discussion; also Harrison, *Introduction*, 473-74.

something so important after the fact and that John's teaching would have been reflected prominently in the writings of the church fathers. However, there is nary a word about an A.D. 70 parousia of Christ in John's post-70 writings or in the fathers. Far more critical than establishing the writing date of Revelation is uncontested evidence that the late-first- and second-century churches were preterists. Here overwhelming testimony points to the fact that they were premillennial.<sup>26</sup>

Though admittedly such discussion does not prove once-for-all that Jesus was a futurist, it does argue strongly and even demand that He was not a preterist. The burden of proof is on the preterist to overturn such compelling external evidence for a late date of Revelation's composition by John. In spite of valiant attempts, preterists have not accomplished this. As an interesting final comment, even the introductory notes in the *New Geneva Study Bible*, for which Dr. Sproul served as General Editor, state, "Most scholars favor a date about A.D. 95" (2004).

#### **Matthew 10:23**

The first of three Matthean time-indicators that supposedly support preterism can be translated, "You will not finish (complete) the cities of Israel until/before the Son of Man comes" (Matt 10:23). The text has no synoptic parallel; it has no significant textual variants; and it has no translation difficulties. However, its interpretation presents a huge challenge. About this passage, D. A. Carson comments, "This verse is among the most difficult in the New Testament canon."<sup>27</sup> Certainly, the verse should not be among the *sine qua non* features of any major doctrine.

Jesus, in sending out the twelve, tells them what they are to do, proclaim that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (vv. 6-7), which will not be accomplished until (before) He comes. To what "coming" does Christ refer? At least six distinguishable possibilities exist.

1. Jesus meant an immediate coming or "catching up" in the sense that, "I will be close behind, so get moving!"<sup>28</sup> The major problem with this view is that the persecutions of vv. 16-23 were not experienced until after Christ's death and resurrection.

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<sup>26</sup>Larry V. Crutchfield, "The Apostle John and Asia Minor as a Source of Premillennialism in the Early Church Fathers," *JETS* 31 (1988):411-27.

<sup>27</sup>D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 250.

<sup>28</sup>Jacques Dupont, "Vous N'Aurez Pas Acheve Les Villes D'Israel Avant Que Les Fils De L'Homme Ne Vienne," *Novum Testamentum* 2 (1958):228-44.



2. Jesus spoke of His coming by way of resurrection.<sup>29</sup> This is out of place in light of the fact that His resurrection is nowhere spoken of as “a coming” and in light of Christ’s NT “coming” being defined as post-ascension by the angels in Acts 1:11.
3. Jesus referred to His coming as it related to the coming of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 15:26-27; 16:7-11).<sup>30</sup> Since the Holy Spirit is a separate person in the triune Godhead, that would not really fulfill the promise of a personal “coming” by Christ.
4. Jesus indicated God’s judgment against Israel in A.D. 70 associated with Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem,<sup>31</sup> but this did not fulfill the parousia promises of Christ.
5. Jesus plainly meant that his parousia would occur within the lifetime of the disciples and that it would be in conjunction with the A.D. 70 plundering of Jerusalem.<sup>32</sup> The problem here and with possibility four is that Jesus did not come.
6. Jesus referred to His future second coming in the sense that God’s gospel mission to the Jew would not cease or be completed prior to His promised eschatological return and to the completion of God’s redemptive purposes among the Jewish nation.<sup>33</sup>

For several reasons, this reviewer favors the view that the “coming” in Matt 10:23 refers to Christ’s future second coming.

1. It accounts for the context that looks beyond the disciples’ immediate ministry (cf. vv. 16-23).
2. It allows for 10:22b occurring elsewhere in an eschatological context (cf.

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<sup>29</sup>Leopold Sabourin, “You Will Not Have Gone Through All the Towns of Israel, Before the Son of Man Comes (Matt 10:23b),” *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 7 (1977):5-11.

<sup>30</sup>John Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 16 (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 458.

<sup>31</sup>A. B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971) 118; D. A. Carson, “Matthew” 252-53; Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (reprint, Grand Rapids: MacDonald, n.d.) 645-47; Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 33a (Dallas: Word, 1993) 278-80; J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 195.

<sup>32</sup>Russell, *The Parousia* 26-29; Sproul, *The Last Days* 9, 13, 24, 38, 56, 86. One is tremendously disappointed to find no exegetical or theological discussion of this text by Sproul, who is eminently capable of such. Because Sproul places such an extreme importance on these time-indicators, it is unfathomable why such a treatment has not been included in his volume.

<sup>33</sup>Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 175-76; F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1983) 109; Charles H. Giblin, “Theological Perspective and Matthew 10:23b,” *Theological Studies* 29 (1968):637-61; William Hendricksen, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 466.

- Matt 24:13; Mark 13:10).
3. The phrase “the Son of Man comes” (cf. Matt 24:30, 44; 25:31) is most compatible with the future parousia view.
  4. It does justice to the eschatological imagery that “a Son of Man was coming” in Dan 7:13.
  5. The aorist subjunctive use of *τελέω* (*teleō*, “complete, finish”) with the double negation of *οὐ μή* (*ou mē*, “not”) makes the most sense grammatically in an ultimate redemptive context, e.g., “the disciples will not have come to the end of the towns of Israel before the parousia breaks upon them.”<sup>34</sup>
  6. Hermeneutically and theologically, it allows for the phrase “shall not finish the cities of Israel until” to be taken in a qualitative sense in full harmony with Paul’s later unambiguous writings about Israel’s redemptive future in Rom 11:1-2, 25-32.
  7. It does not require calling an A.D. 70 “non-coming” a “coming” as proposed by preterists.
  8. It allows for the gospel to reach the Gentiles (cf. Matt 28:19; Mark 13:10) without God forsaking Israel salvifically. Christ intended to communicate that what began redemptively for Israel at Christ’s first advent (Matt 1:21) would be continued until He returns at His second advent.

A futuristic interpretation of “coming” in Matt 10:23 is contextually, grammatically, hermeneutically, and theologically more reasonable than the other views. The noted NT scholar F. F. Bruce summarizes Jesus’ intended meaning in this text:

What, then, does the saying mean in *this* context? It means, simply, that the evangelisation of Israel will not be completed before the end of the present age, which comes with the advent of the Son of man. . . . Paul, from his own perspective, expresses much the same hope when he foresees the salvation of ‘all Israel’, the sequel of the ingathering of the full tale of Gentile believers, being consummated at the time when ‘the Deliverer will come from Zion’ (Rom. 11:25-27).<sup>35</sup>

In this case, Jesus is a futurist!

#### **Matthew 16:28**

This second of three Matthean time references that supposedly supports a preterist view of Christ’s second coming (Matt 16:28) has two synoptic parallels (Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27), a text with no remarkable textual variants, and no translation

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<sup>34</sup>R. Schippers, “τέλος,” *DNTT* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 2:62-63.

<sup>35</sup>Bruce, *Hard Sayings* 109.

challenges. However, as with Matthew 10:23, interpreting the text is no easy matter. C. E. B. Cranfield calls the parallel in Mark 9:1 “one of the most puzzling [sayings of Christ] in the gospels.”<sup>36</sup> One wonders why a text of this interpretive difficulty would be included as a critical feature to defend/support a major theological position.

Jesus has been expanding the disciples’ thinking to include His death (16:21). He then moves from the unthinkable to the sublime—His second advent (16:27). He immediately promises that a few of the disciples would not die until they saw the Son of Man coming in His kingdom. What event did Jesus have in mind when He made this somewhat enigmatic promise?

At least six plausible possibilities have been advanced.

1. Jesus looked to His resurrection.<sup>37</sup>
2. Jesus meant His ascension.<sup>38</sup>
3. Jesus looked ahead to the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost.<sup>39</sup>
4. Jesus pointed to a coming in A.D. 70—the preterist view.<sup>40</sup>
5. Jesus referred to the advance of His kingdom through the church.<sup>41</sup>
6. Jesus had the transfiguration in mind.<sup>42</sup>

Some compelling reasons why this reviewer prefers the near/immediate historical view of the transfiguration are as follows:<sup>43</sup>

1. This was the majority view of the early church fathers.
2. It fits the sense of immediacy raised by Christ.
3. Though the unfortunate chapter division between Matthew 16:28 and 17:1

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<sup>36</sup>C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Cambridge: University Press, 1972) 285.

<sup>37</sup>Bruce, *Hard Sayings* 154; Cranfield, *Saint Mark* 287-88; I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 377-79.

<sup>38</sup>Hendricksen, *Matthew* 659-60.

<sup>39</sup>Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 327.

<sup>40</sup>Donald Hagner, *Matthew 14–28 in Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 33b (Dallas: Word, 1995) 485-87; Russell, *The Parousia* 29-33; Sproul, *Last Days* 23, 53, 55.

<sup>41</sup>Carson, “Matthew” 382.

<sup>42</sup>Blomberg, *Matthew* 261; D. Edmond Hiebert, *Mark* (Chicago: Moody, 1974) 211-12; S. Lewis Johnson, “The Transfiguration of Christ,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124 (1967):133-43; A. L. Moore, *The Parousia in the New Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966) 127, 130.

<sup>43</sup>If the reader wonders at this point why the reviewer has not interacted with Dr. Sproul in discussing these time-reference texts, it is because there is nothing with which to interact except his assertions with little or no attempt to support them. *The Last Days According to Jesus* is long on assertion/conclusion and inadequately short on exegetical or theological substantiation.

might lead one to believe that there is no contextual connection between 16:28 and that which follows, the parallel passages in Mark 9 and Luke 9 where no intervening chapter breaks appear, prove that what follows on the Mount of Transfiguration is a vital part of the immediate context.

4. The “some” of 16:28 is fulfilled by the “three” of 17:1. It was to be an exceptional experience, not a unanimous one. The resurrection, the ascension, Pentecost, and the kingdom were occasions experienced by all of the disciples, and therefore could not have been what Jesus meant.
5. No one “saw” Christ in A.D. 70; this is a major disqualifier for the preterist interpretation.
6. Only John survived to see Christ in His later glory (Rev 1:12-20), but Peter, James, and John—i.e., some of the disciples (three out of the twelve)—actually saw Christ in His kingdom glory and power on the Mount of Transfiguration, plus they heard the glorious, powerful voice of God the Father. Additionally, they saw kingdom power manifest by the appearance on earth of Moses who died about 1405 B.C. and Elijah who was caught up alive by God’s chariots to heaven about 850 B.C.
7. Both John (John 1:14) and Peter (2 Peter 1:16-18) later wrote about this powerful, kingdom preview. Their descriptions of the actual event closely parallel the expectations raised by Christ’s promise.

Matthew 16:28 refers to the prophetic preview of Christ’s future parousia glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, because it is contextually superior (3), the only acceptable view with regard to substance (2, 4, 5, 6, 7), and the historically preferred view (1). Therefore, the passage definitely shows Jesus to be a futurist, because He promised to be seen at His future parousia just as He previewed it at the Transfiguration. He could not have been a preterist, because no one saw Christ at the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem.

Judging from the above factors and the place of the narrative in the Gospels, it seems safe to affirm that the transfiguration event was a kind of preview, and thus anticipation, of kingdom power and glory which would come permanently at the parousia.<sup>44</sup>

Since this text refers a time in Christ’s earthly ministry, it does not directly prove that Jesus was a futurist; but given the implications of what Christ previewed for the three disciples, it strongly points in that direction. It clearly does not teach that Christ would come in A.D. 70.

#### **Matthew 24:34**

Matthew 24:34 is the third of three Matthean time-indicators used to

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<sup>44</sup>Charles Holman, “The Idea of an Imminent Parousia,” *Studia Biblica Et Theologica* III (1973):23.

support the preterists' contention that Christ's parousia occurred in A.D. 70 when Rome sacked Jerusalem. It has two synoptic companions (Mark 13:30; Luke 21:22) and has no textual variants. All three texts involve a straightforward translation.

One very confident preterist has claimed that, after a complete study of Matt 24:34, his view is "indisputably clear" and "absolutely demanding."<sup>45</sup> In contrast, noted NT scholar J. Fitzmeyer lamented that this is "...the most difficult phrase to interpret in this complicated eschatological discourse."<sup>46</sup> When dealing with such complexity as "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" involves, Fitzmeyer's approach is the sensible one.

At least seven plausible views have arisen regarding Matthew 24:34.

1. Christ was mistaken.
2. Christ was speaking of the human race in general.
3. Christ was referring to A.D. 70. This is held by preterists<sup>47</sup> and non-preterists.<sup>48</sup>
4. Christ spoke of faithful Christians in general.
5. Christ referred to the Jewish race generically (futurist view).<sup>49</sup>
6. Christ referred to a future evil generation.<sup>50</sup>
7. Christ was indicating the generation which would be alive at His future parousia.<sup>51</sup>

In this passage, the futurist possibilities (6 & 7) are preferred over the preterist option (3a) for very convincing reasons:

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<sup>45</sup>Ice and Gentry, *Great Tribulation* 26-27.

<sup>46</sup>Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1985) 1353.

<sup>47</sup>Ice and Gentry, *Great Tribulation* 26-27, 181; Russell, *The Parousia* 83-89; Sproul, *Last Days* 51-68.

<sup>48</sup>Bruce, *Hard Sayings* 228; Carson, "Matthew" 507; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* 715; David L. Turner, "The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1-41: Interaction with Evangelical Treatments," *Grace Theological Journal* 10 (1989):3-27; David Wenham, "'This Generation Will Not Pass....' A Study of Jesus' Future Expectation in Mark 13," *Festschrift for Donald Guthrie* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1982) 127.

<sup>49</sup>Duane A. Dunham, "TENE in Matthew 24:34," *New Testament Essays in Honor of Homer A. Kent, Jr.*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH, 1991) 125-41; Hendricksen, *Matthew* 867-69.

<sup>50</sup>Evald Lövestam, *Jesus and 'this Generation'* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995) 81-87; Neil D. Nelson, Jr., "'This Generation' in Matt 24:34: A Literary Critical Perspective," *JETS* 38 (1996):369-85; Robert L. Thomas, unpublished class notes (Sun Valley, Calif.: The Master's Seminary, n.d.).

<sup>51</sup>Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, in Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 1688-92; Hiebert, *Mark* 331; John MacArthur, *Matthew 24-28*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1989) 63-67.

1. Options 1, 2, 4, and 5 have been set aside as less than compelling because of faulty theology (1) or being too general for such a specific text (2, 4, 5).
2. Contextually, Matthew 24 and 25 must be taken as a whole, not separated. The preterist view cannot handle the content of “the coming of the Son of Man” throughout 24:37–25:30, a theme which began in 24:3, 27, 30. The “coming” of 24:30-31 is the same coming of 25:31 and cannot possibly be accounted for or said to be fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.
3. Historically, the church that existed after A.D. 70 and in close time proximity to the event was still looking for a future fulfillment of Matthew 24–25, i.e., the second advent of Christ. Since John lived beyond A.D. 70, one would have expected him to have at least commented on this and for it to be reported by those who might have heard him, that Jesus had come in accord with the preterist view. However, there is no evidence of this whatsoever. Just the opposite is true in the *Didache* and Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho*,<sup>52</sup> both written decades after A.D. 70.
4. Grammatically speaking, “all these things” (πάντα ταῦτα, *panta tauta*) give direction to help determine the meaning of the text. Whether one looks back or ahead in the passage, “these things” are the features which both precede and accompany Christ at His second coming (cf. vv. 27, 30, 37, 39, 42, 44). Keep in mind that Matt 24:4-44 is all part of Christ’s direct answer to the disciples’ question in 24:3, “What will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?”
5. Because it has been concluded contextually, historically, and grammatically that Christ’s second coming is yet future, not historically fulfilled in A.D. 70, one can then deal with the meaning of “this generation.” The interpretation has two possibilities: “generation” can be taken pejoratively (view 6) or temporally (view 7). The *pejorative view* understands “generation” in the sense of referring to the category of rebellious, sinful people who have rejected God’s truth and righteousness (cf. Matt 12:45; 23:35-36); this has an OT precedent in Deut 32:5, 20 and Prov 30:11-14.<sup>53</sup> The *temporal view* understands “generation” to be the group of contemporaries who are alive at the time of Christ’s parousia, extending from the birth pangs of 24:3 through the coming of the Son of Man (24:44).

Either of these last two views deals with Matthew 24–25 in a futurist sense. Whether one opts for the “evil generation” view or the “eschatological generation” view, an eschatological period of time beyond A.D. 70 is in view. Thus, it is

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<sup>52</sup>For example, *Didache* 16 (ca. A.D. 100) and Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 110 (ca. A.D. 140-150).

<sup>53</sup>“γενεά,” *BAGD* 154; γενεά,” *DNTT* 2:36.

concluded from this text that Jesus was a futurist.

### Conclusions

The preterist view, by its own definition and admission, essentially rests upon (1) a Revelation writing date before A.D. 70 and (2) the “time-text” indicators in Matt 10:23, 16:28, and 24:34 all pointing to an A.D. 70 fulfillment.

In regard to the writing date of Revelation, the overwhelming consensus of second to twenty-first century scholars, with good reason, embraces a late writing date of Revelation (ca. A.D. 95) rather than the early date (pre-A.D. 70), with the exception of the nineteenth century when postmillennialism was the majority opinion. This one conclusion alone eliminates a preterist approach from viable consideration.

The biblical focus of preterism on A.D. 70 is not as dominant, or clear-cut, or even obvious to the careful interpreter as preterists would have one believe; this is evidenced by numerous other attractive interpretive options which preterists fail to appreciate fully when dealing with Matt 10:23, 16:28, and 24:34. Preterists unanimously interpret all three Matthean “time-indicators” as referring to A.D. 70, while others of differing eschatological schools of thought generally deal with these texts independently and exegetically. It would appear that the preterist view has been used to interpret these passages, rather than the texts being treated independently of one another and without undue concern for particular theological outcomes. Put another way, only the preterist position demands a unanimous A.D. 70 interpretation for all three time-reference indicators—Matt 10:23; 16:26; 24:34. However, the three “time-text” indicators, so critical to proving a preterist approach correct, have better alternative interpretations (both before and after A.D. 70) than A.D. 70 alone.

To build one’s eschatology on textual interpretations that have other, more compelling views is risky if not fatal. The three Matthean texts used by preterists are generally judged by scholars to be less than immediately clear, not to mention that they are among the most elusive texts to interpret in the entire NT. In this reviewer’s opinion, preterism has erected its eschatological superstructure on just such a weak foundation as understanding all four of these “time-frame” references in relationship to A.D. 70. They do not effectively support the weight of preterism (moderate or otherwise) as proposed by R. C. Sproul, which, by the way, actually involves three separate comings of Christ, but that is the subject of another essay.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, it is concluded, based on a review of these four time-text indicators, that Jesus was a futurist in His teachings, and certainly not a preterist.

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<sup>54</sup>Sproul, *Last Days* 170, in Table 7.2 illustrates Christ’s first advent at His birth (assumed), Christ’s second advent in A.D. 70 (explicit), and Christ’s third advent at some unknown time in the future (explicit).