

## Redating the Apostolic Fathers

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**I**N OUR PREVIOUS ARTICLE, we focused on the *silence* of Christian writers in the first generation after AD 70. There was not a single pre-70 Christian who showed up after AD 70 to claim the fulfillment of the big three eschatological events (*Parousia*, *Resurrection*, and *Judgment*). That was an extremely *strange silence*. And it is not what we would have expected to find if any of those pre-70 saints who had experienced the end-time events were still alive on earth afterward. They should have at least *known* that the events occurred and been *claiming* the fulfillment! Yet we don't even have that! And we suggested that their *silence* about the fulfillment was because they were *absent* (raptured).

However, this is where the plot thickens. Even though Charles Hill (a futurist critic) agrees that there were no claims of fulfillment after AD 70, he nevertheless points to several post-70 writers who taught that the end-time events were *still future*, thus implying that those events *never happened* in AD 70 (*WSTTB*, pp. 63-119).<sup>1</sup>

### End-time Events Still Future?

This futurist challenge is based on at least two assumptions about the *Apostolic Father* (AF) writings: (1) All of them were written *AFTER AD 70*, and (2) All of them say that the end-time events were *still future*.

However, that first assumption is not necessarily valid. It ignores the possibility that some of those AF writings, especially the four earliest ones (e.g., *Didache*, *Barnabas*, *Clement*, and *Hermas*), could easily have been written *BEFORE AD 70* at the same time the *New Testament* books were written. And if they were, it would explain why they said the end-time events were *still future*. Those events had not happened yet. Thus, redating them before AD 70 eliminates this futurist objection against preterism.

### But How Can They Be Redated?

Futurists wonder why we only redate these *four earliest AF writers*. Why not the later ones also? It is because these four are the only AF writers who were either (1) mentioned by name in the *New Testament* or (2) can be shown to be Christians before AD 70, and (3) were pre-70 saints who could have lived

through the end-time events, and (4) would have known about their occurrence in AD 70, and (5) would have been able as eyewitnesses to claim the fulfillment afterward.

The rest of the post-70 AF writers do not fit those five criteria, and therefore pose no significant challenge to full preterism. For instance, *Ignatius, Polycarp, Papias, Dionysius, and Justin* were not mentioned in the New Testament, nor is there any proof that they were Christians before AD 70, nor that they wrote during that first generation after AD 70. Instead, they wrote in the second century *after a whole generation of silence had passed*. And because of *the rapture*, there were no pre-70 saints still around after AD 70 to claim that the end-time events had happened. Consequently, those second-century AF writers were *unaware* of the occurrence and assumed that the events were *still future*.

And that is why we will only deal with these *four earliest AF writers* and show that they wrote *before AD 70* at a time when the end-time events were *still future*. And if these four were written before AD 70, and the rest of the AF writings were written in the second century, that really *widens the gap of silence* between the pre-70 and post-70 AF writings, and very effectively removes all of the AF writers from being used against full preterism.

So, let's look at these *four earliest AF writers* to see how their eschatological statements compare to the New Testament statements. Take special note of the **boldfaced** and *italicized* words and phrases.

### **Didache (Teaching of the Twelve)**

**Date and Authorship:** The internal evidence suggests that it was composed in Judea by Jewish law-keeping Christians very early before the first Gentiles came into the Church (i.e., before Cornelius in AD 38), at a time when the end was expected within their lifetime. It is very similar in perspective to the earliest books of our New Testament such as Matthew.

**Did. 10:6** May grace come, and may *this world [kosmos] pass away ... Maranatha!* [*Our Lord, come!*] (cf. 1 Cor 16:22).

**Did. 16:1** Watch over your life: do not let your lamps go out, and do not be unprepared, but be ready, for you do not know ***the hour when our Lord is coming***.

**Did. 16:2** Gather together frequently, seeking the things that benefit your souls, for all the time you have believed will be of no use to you if you are *not found perfect in the last time*.

**Did. 16:3** For *in the last days* the false prophets and corrupters will abound, and the sheep will be turned into wolves, and love will be turned into hate.

**Did. 16:6** And then there will appear the signs of the truth: first the sign of an *opening in heaven*, then the sign of the *sound of a trumpet*, and third, the **resurrection of the dead**.

**Did. 16:8** Then the world will see *the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven*.

### The Epistle of Barnabas

**Date and Authorship:** The internal evidence suggests that it was composed by *Barnabas* (Acts 4:36) in about AD 54-56. The past destruction of the temple mentioned in **Barn. 16:1-5** was not AD 70, but rather the Babylonian destruction in 586 BC. And that enables Barnabas to be dated before 70. Also, since **Barn. 4:4-5** alludes to the ten horns of Daniel, there is good reason to think that Daniel's prophecy was understood before AD 70 without having to date Barnabas after AD 70.

**Barn. 4:1** ... Let us avoid, therefore, absolutely all the works of lawlessness lest the works of lawlessness overpower us, and let us hate the *deception of the present age*, so that we may be loved **in the age about to come**.

**Barn 4:3** *The last stumbling block is at hand* ... the Master has **cut short the times and the days** for this reason, so that his beloved might **make haste and come into his inheritance**.

**Barn. 4:9** ...Consequently, let us be on guard *in the last days* ... *now in the age of lawlessness*, we also resist ... the **about to come stumbling blocks**, lest the black one find an opportunity to sneak in.

**Barn. 5:3** ... he has made known to us ... **the about to be events...** (cf. Barn. 1:7)

**Barn. 5:7** [the Lord submitted to suffer] in order that he might ... prove, while he was still on earth, that *after he has brought about the resurrection, he will execute judgment*.

**Barn. 7:2** ... the Son of God, who is Lord and is **about to judge the living and the dead** ...

**Barn. 15:5** ... *when his son comes, he will destroy the time of the lawless one and will judge the ungodly* ...

**Barn. 18:2** ... [Satan is the] *ruler of the present time of lawlessness*.

**Barn. 21:3** **The day is near** when everything will perish together with the Evil One. **The Lord, and his reward, is near**.

### 1 Clement and 2 Clement

**Date and Authorship:** The internal evidence suggests that both of these letters were composed by the New Testament character known as *Clement* (Phil 4:3) in AD 64, just before the Neronian persecution.

**1 Clem. 23:5** Truly his purpose will be accomplished quickly and suddenly, just as the scripture also testifies: “***He will come quickly and not delay***; and *the Lord will come suddenly into his temple*, even the Holy One whom you expect.”

**1 Clem. 24:1** ... the Master continually points out to us ***the about to come resurrection*** of which he made the Lord Jesus Christ the first fruit when he raised him from the dead.

**1 Clem. 28:1** ... abandon the abominable lusts that spawn evil works, in order that we may be shielded by his mercy from ***the about to come judgments***.

**1 Clem. 42:3** ... preaching the good news that ***the kingdom of God is about to come***.

**2 Clem. 5:5** ... our stay in this world of the flesh is insignificant and transitory, but ... rest in ***the about to come kingdom and eternal life!***

**2 Clem. 6:3** *This age* and ***the one that is about to be*** are two enemies.

**2 Clem. 7:1** ... let us compete in the games, realizing that ***the competition is at hand*** ...

**2 Clem. 11:5** ... patiently endure in hope, so that we may also *receive the reward*.

**2 Clem. 11:7** ... we will *enter his kingdom* and *receive the promises* that ear has not heard nor eye seen nor the human heart imagined.

**2 Clem. 16:3** But you know that ***the day of judgment is already coming*** ...

**2 Clem. 17:4** For the Lord said, “*I am coming to gather together* all the nations, tribes, and languages.” Now by this he means *the day of his appearing*, when *he will come* and *redeem each of us* according to our deeds.

**2 Clem. 18:2** ... I make every effort to pursue righteousness ... because I fear ***the judgment about to be***.

**2 Clem. 20:2** ... We are competing in the contest of a living God, and are being trained by *the present life* in order that we may be crowned in ***the life about to come***.

### **The Shepherd of Hermas**

**Date and Authorship:** The internal evidence suggests that it was composed by the New Testament character known as *Hermas* (Rom 16:14) in AD 64 soon after Paul was executed and before the Neronian persecution.

**Shep. 1:8** ... But those who aim at evil things in their hearts bring death and captivity upon themselves, especially *those who lay claim to this age* and pride themselves on their wealth and do not hold fast to **the good things that are to about to be**.

**Shep. 6:7** ... Blessed are those of you who patiently endure **the coming great tribulation** and who will not deny their life.

**Shep. 13:1** ... The stones that are square and white and fit at their joints, these are the **apostles** and bishops and teachers and deacons ... some have **fallen asleep**, while others are **still living** ...

**Shep. 16:9** Then I began to ask ... if the *consummation had already arrived* ... can you not see that *the tower is still being built? When the tower is finished being built, then the end comes. But it will be built up quickly*.

**Shep. 17:5** Look to **the coming judgment** ... until the tower is finished.

**Shep. 23:5** ... this beast is a foreshadowing of **the great tribulation that is about to be** ...

**Shep. 53:2** the righteous, who are **about to dwell in the age to come** ...

**Shep. 58:3** ... the absence of the Master is *the time remaining until his Parousia*.

**Shep. 89:3** ... *he was revealed in the last days of the consummation* ... in order that those who are **about to be saved** may enter the kingdom of God ...

**Shep. 103:6** ... If any are **about to repent, let them do so quickly**, before the tower is completed, or else they will be destroyed ...

### What We Have Seen Here

The **boldfaced** words and phrases in the above **Early AF** texts mark the end-time events which were “near at hand” and “about to occur” at the time these four AF texts were written. These writers did not merely suggest that the end-time events might occur sometime in the *indefinite future*, but rather unequivocally affirmed that those events were “about to occur” in their lifetime in the very near future. And since this is the same “about to occur” *perspective* as the New Testament writings, it suggests that they were written at the same time as the New Testament.

Thus, as Robert Kraft notes in his commentary on the Apostolic Fathers, these earliest AF writers *breathe the same eschatological air* as the New Testament writers (*AFC*, p. 29).<sup>2</sup> This conclusion is not merely based on their usage of *similar* words and phrases or *nebulous* “still future” statements, but rather on their

usage of the *same* phraseology, with the *same* frequency and intensity, and the same “*about to occur*” perspective as the New Testament writers.

For instance, here are the frequency statistics for the Greek word MELLO (“about to be”) as it is used in these three groups of writings:

- **New Testament writers:** 109 occurrences in 106 verses
- **Early AF writers:** 73 occurrences in 67 verses
- **Later AF writers:** 12 occurrences in 12 verses

Both the **New Testament** and the **Early AF** writings have a high frequency of MELLO usage, whereas the **Later AF** writers have less than one sixth as many occurrences of MELLO as the Early AF. That difference in frequency is significant.

### **Same ‘about to occur’ Perspective**

Furthermore, the eschatological events that were “*about to occur*” (MELLO) in the **Early AF** are the same events that were about to occur in the **New Testament**: e.g., the age about to come, the last stumbling block, judgment of the living and dead, the Lord and his reward are near, the Day drawing near, come quickly and not delay, the Resurrection, the Judgment, the Kingdom, eternal life, the good things to come, the great tribulation, and entrance into the heavenly Kingdom.

However, in the **Later AF**, we do not see any of those eschatological events connected to MELLO (“about to occur”). For example, only five of the twelve occurrences of MELLO in the Later AF were eschatological. And those five occurrences are not referring to the eschatological events, but rather to *individual personal rewards or punishments* which each individual would *receive in the afterlife*: e.g., individual afterlife wrath, individual place to dwell in the afterlife, eternal life in the age about to be, afterlife judgment and punishment for the wicked, and one reference to eternity (in the ages about to come).

Thus, there is a big difference between the Early AF and the Later AF in the kinds of events or afterlife experiences that were “about to occur.” While the **Early AF** mention all the same eschatological events and individual afterlife rewards and punishments as the **New Testament**, the **Later AF** focus almost exclusively on the individual rewards or punishments to be received in the afterlife. This means that the Early AF perfectly match the “*about to occur*” perspective of the New Testament, while the Later AF are

significantly different. And that strongly implies that the **Early AF** were written before AD 70 at the same time as the **New Testament**.

Our hope is that this will spark some interest for some serious Bible students or seminary students who will make patristic studies a lifelong venture. Maybe you can take these ideas and develop them further. And if you have questions or comments about any of this, be sure to contact me via email. All feedback is welcome. Here is my email address: [preterist1@preterist.org](mailto:preterist1@preterist.org). ☩

1. Charles Hill's chapter in Keith Mathison (Editor). *When Shall These Things Be? (WSTTB)*. [2004], pp. 63-119.
2. Robert A. Kraft. *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary (AFC): Vol. 3*, pp. 27-29.