

The Case for Preterism

by Aaron Amstutz

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IN MANY OBJECTIONS TO preterism, there is an argument that the preterist, while doing justice to the near-term time statements of the New Testament, makes unfounded conclusions regarding the mode of the Day of the Lord and the coming of the Kingdom. The argument is that the cataclysmic language, while potentially figurative, needs to be taken more literally and that the first generation of the church would certainly have expected something more world-wide and momentous to all of humanity. There aren't many passages in the New Testament that the preterist can turn to that conclusively support a more subtle Day of the Lord (from a terrestrial standpoint). In this brief essay, I point to two passages that are often used against preterists, but wherein I find plenty of evidence to support the preterist understanding of the mode of the Day of the Lord; being physically limited to Jerusalem but spiritually universal is the same type of expectation that the early Church held.

The Thessalonian Rumor

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 (ESV)

1 Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, 2 not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. 3 Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, 4 who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. 5 Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? 6 And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. 7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. 9 The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, 10 and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 11 Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, 12 in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

These verses talk about a rumor that is spreading (“*either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us*”) that has led some in the church to be shaken up. The rumor is specifically “*that the day of the Lord has come.*” For such a rumor to take root, there had to be some elements of truth (that confirmed some understandings), and, as Paul subsequently points out, there are some elements of error. In the subsequent corrective section, let’s consider what Paul chooses to correct and what Paul chooses to not correct.

What Paul Does Not Correct

Paul *does not* state that it would be impossible for him to write a letter regarding the coming of the day of the Lord. This is crucial to notice. If Paul and the early Christians expected all believers to be raptured from the face of the earth, then it would be impossible for Paul to write a letter and equally impossible for the church to receive such a letter. That is clearly not their understanding — neither for the Thessalonians nor Paul. The Thessalonians believed that they may have needed to be informed about the coming of the day of the Lord and that Paul could be in a position to write such a letter. Paul’s corrective does not challenge that assumption. That is, by the way that Paul corrects their misunderstanding, he affirms two things: 1) that *he could have written* such a letter (but didn’t), and 2) it would have been possible that the second coming could have occurred without their knowing it (but it hadn’t yet occurred because of some other signs that remained to be fulfilled). In Paul’s correction, he recites more event-based signs that *hadn’t* taken place yet: 3) “*rebellion comes*” 4) “*man of lawlessness is revealed*” (with signs associated with him taking “*his seat in the temple of God*”), and 5) Jesus will “*kill with the breath of his mouth*” this lawless one *by “the appearance of his coming.”* But again, it is crucial to note that Paul doesn’t even hint that their understanding of the mode of the day of the Lord needs correction.

Let’s first unpack these two elements in what Paul implicitly affirms. He affirms that the coming of the Lord would be soon (“*for the mystery of lawlessness is already at work*”) and that they were not foolish for expecting the return of the Lord in their generation. Paul, in his correction, only points out the unfulfilled timing of the event-based signs and does not correct their assumption that they *could have heard from him in a letter* about the coming of the Day of the Lord.

When Paul explains why the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ had not yet occurred, he *confirms* the accuracy of their other expectations that are implicit in the passage — the expectation that a word or letter from Paul *could* announce that Jesus Christ had returned *and* that they would still be on earth to receive

it. Note again that, for Paul to write such a letter, he too would still need to be on earth *after* the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, by acknowledging the *types* of event-based signs that needed to be fulfilled in the coming of the Day of the Lord, Paul is also affirming that it would be possible for them to *need to be informed* that it had occurred. That is, if the church had assumed that the Day of the Lord would be a world-wide calamity that literally everyone would see, then a rumor or mysterious letter would be dismissed out-of-hand (by the Thessalonians). But the rumor was *not* dismissed out-of-hand, and Paul doesn't correct their understanding of the *mode* of the Day of the Lord [again, only correcting the event-based sign timing].

What Paul Chooses to Correct

Let's also take a look at the three elements that Paul uses to correct their understanding of what still must take place. 1) The rebellion comes. Note the definite article — “*the rebellion*” (or “the apostasy”). This is not generalized disobedience but a specific instance, likely the rebellion of the Jews against the Romans (the “Great Jewish Revolt” in AD 66). 2 & 3) The “*man of lawlessness is revealed.*” Whether we assign this to Nero, Vespasian (*Titus Flavius Vespasianus*), or the last Jewish High Priest, Phannias ben Samuel, the identity (or identities) is debatable — it could be that one is the “man of sin” (vv. 3-4, Vespasian) and one is the “man of lawlessness” (Nero), and one is the “lawless one” (v. 8, Phannias ben Samuel). However, the point is that the revealing of this person (or persons) had not taken place yet. That is, Paul's corrective is primarily one of the timing of events.

The Hymenaeus and Philetus Error

There is a very similar occurrence in the second letter to Timothy:

2 Timothy 2:16-18

16 Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. 17 Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, 18 who have departed from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.

Here we are introduced to some early teachers who were teaching a version of pre-70AD-preterism. These two, Hymenaeus and Philetus, were teaching “*that the resurrection has already taken place.*” We learn, tellingly, that their teaching is spreading like gangrene. This teaching, to catch on in a significant way,

must have had a strong note of plausibility to the early church. Again, let's take a look at what Paul chooses to correct and what he chooses not to correct.

What Paul Does Not Correct

Even as Paul condemns the teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus, he does so in a way that doesn't call out the *impossibility* of their false claim. After some pastoral comments to Timothy about opposing such false teachers at the end of chapter 2, he returns to address this particular untruth at the beginning of chapter 3.

1 But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. 2 People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, 4 treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— 5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.

Then Paul takes the rest of chapter 3 to expound more on the characteristics of false teachers and to contrast them with his way of life. He returns to the topic of the coming judgment at the beginning of chapter 4.

1 . . . in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: 2 Preach the word...

Note in these sections that Paul *does not* argue against the possibility of the resurrection occurring without massive upheaval on earth. He does argue that it will happen soon (2 Tim 4:1, 3, 8) but that it hasn't happened *yet*. To teach "*that the resurrection has already taken place*" would not be even plausible under an assumption that all believers would be raptured on the Day of the Lord — that is, it would be dismissed out-of-hand. The fact that the teaching was spreading meant that there was a plausibility to the teaching to the early church audience, even without the signs that occurred in 70AD.

What Paul Chooses to Correct

Paul points out that event-signs associated with the last days hadn't yet been fully revealed (2 Tim 3:1ff). Paul condemns the teaching for *destroying the faith of some* and for not being true — not as being antithetical to the gospel or the core teachings of the church. In the verses that follow, he states that such

false teachings are dishonorable and need to be purged from the church (vv. 19, 21, 23). The teacher of such disruptive errors “*25 must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, 26 and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.*”

Why was such a teaching (that was correct in many assumptions, but wrong in timing) so destructive? Why did it destroy the faith of some? The answer isn’t given explicitly in the letter to Timothy. It could be that the trumpet hadn’t sounded (1 Cor 15:52, 1 Thess 4:16), and so the physical signs of the Day of the Lord were minimized by the teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus. Paul gives us hints through the remainder of the letter to Timothy, it seems that perhaps the reason is that “*quarreling about words*” (v. 14), “*foolish and stupid arguments*” (v. 23), and “*godless chatter*” were starting to infect the church and cause divisions. Such divisive arguments would produce ungodliness.

The problem for Hymenaeus and Philetus was two-fold: 1) They were pre-70AD preterists — that is, preterists without any of the signs of fulfillment that would occur in the terrestrial world, and 2) their claim of a fulfilled resurrection contradicted the testimony of the still-living apostles — thus inevitably leading to a division in the church between apostolic authority and their self-aggrandized authority based on “foolish and stupid arguments.” I think the second problem (contradicting the still-living apostles) is what “destroyed the faith of some.” That is, if the apostles were wrong about something as crucial as the resurrection, then how could they be trusted with other elements of the message of Christianity? We ought to remember that doctrinal unity is very much tied to the functional unity of the church, and where the focus becomes some “*foolish and stupid argument,*” the church would splinter under diversity of teachings [an admonition that the modern-day preterist still needs to hear; i.e., we should not be causes of division in our local churches, even as we seek to pursue clarity and truth in teachings on eschatology.]

Conclusion

To summarize, the way that Paul corrects both the rumor in 2 Thessalonians and the false teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus shows what he does and does not object to. The spreading of the rumor recorded in 2 Thessalonians and the false teachings referred to in 2 Timothy also tell us about the mental model of the Day of the Lord for the early church. These things, taken together, help to support the claim that the first generation of Christians *did not* hold to a world-wide rapture associated with the day of the Lord, nor to a world-wide (terrestrial) cataclysm associated with the resurrection of the dead. Instead, they held to a more limited physical manifestation of the Day of the Lord and the resurrection of the dead.

Paul does not challenge the assumptions on the mode, but does reinforce the events that would be time-markers for the day of the Lord. ✝