

Chapter Eight

The Preterist Viewpoint

Basic Premise: The Book of Revelation is primarily prophetic of the imminent events that were to happen in 70AD with the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, though some accept the last chapters as pertaining to the end of the age. With both Full and Partial Preterists there is some dispute, with Full Preterists insisting Revelation 19 was only spiritual and also occurred in 70AD. They typically interpret the millennium as being a symbolic number only and that it represents the church age.

The term Preterist is derived from the Latin, *praeter*, which means ‘past’. **The Preterist view is divided** into two main camps: Full Preterism and Partial Preterism.

Full Preterists believe that all the prophecies found in Revelation were fulfilled in the events that surrounded the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 70AD which they interpret was the end of the age. The basis for their thinking is the fact that there are several verses scattered throughout the book that indicate that the prophesied events were to happen shortly. In their thinking, the destruction of the temple was the end of the Old Covenant. The 40 year period of overlap from the death and resurrection of Christ, was the final closing of the old age and we are now living in the eternal state. They say that the new heaven and the new earth are a spiritual state that was brought in by the New Covenant in the same way we are called a new creation because we are born again, the old having passed away when we received eternal life. Their understanding of the second coming of Christ is that it was fulfilled when judgment came upon the Kingdom of Judah when Jerusalem fell to the Romans.

Thus, to them, Matthew Chapter 24 and Mark Chapter 13 have already been completely fulfilled. Consequently, they do not take a synoptic view of Jesus teachings on this subject that includes all of **Luke Chapter 21 which mentions the “time of the Gentiles.” They equate statements by Jesus about the** coming destruction of Jerusalem with similar sounding statements concerning the final resurrection, making one event of the two scenarios.

According to Preterist thinking, the Church Age we are now experiencing is the thousand years of reigning with Christ, making the thousand years but a metaphoric statement only symbolically spoken of in Revelation 20:1-10. Their view of the resurrection is spiritual and not physical, and so they say we have already passed from death into the immortal eternal life. In their view of the resurrection there is no opening of the graves; we simply leave our bodies and there is no transformation of our natural bodies into glorified bodies as described by Paul.

It is on this point that the Partial Preterists depart from the Full Preterists, declaring their resurrection doctrine to be heresy as it denies the bodily resurrection which is one of the central tenants of our faith. In this the Partial Preterist Viewpoint remains within the boundaries of orthodoxy. They agree with the majority of Christendom that the last chapters of Revelation do actually speak of the future resurrection and the day of judgement, but are in agreement with Full Preterism that all of Revelation Chapters 1-19 were fulfilled in their entirety during the forty years leading to the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD along with Matthew 24 and Mark 13. All this information can be found on the many Preterist web-sites online.

Preterists contend that their teachings find support from a number of early church writers who considered the Messianic Millennium Doctrine with Messiah reigning in Jerusalem to be a heresy, of whom Tyconius, Jerome, and Augustine are of note. However, the refutations of the Millennium **Doctrine by these ‘church fathers’ do not include any endorsement of the Preterist view beyond a denial** of a Millennial Messianic Age, for these post apostolic writers were not actually commenting on the visions in the Book of Revelation, they were only contending with the Millennialists.

To further support their viewpoint, Preterists also complain of the Millennium Doctrine’s origins in Judaism, saying that it finds its support in Jewish apocryphal books of which the Book of Enoch, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch are prominent.

Although Preterists may find elements of their doctrine in some of the early church writings, apart from Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth century (mentioned above), there are no known commentaries expounding the prophetic elements of the Book of Revelation until the Protestant Reformation. The Preterist Viewpoint was first championed by a Catholic Jesuit priest named Luis de Alcazar (1554-1613). **Alcazar’s interpretation is considered to be a response to Martin Luther’s identification of the Pope as** the Antichrist. By interpreting the visions of the Apocalypse as symbols of the events in the first century, the mark of the beast and the number of his name could then be redirected toward a historical character and away from the Papacy. Preterists point to later discoveries regarding the number 666 which seem to support this view.

For centuries the mystery surrounding the mark of the beast and the number 666 mentioned in the Book of Revelation has generated much discussion as to the identity of the Antichrist who is prophesied to appear on the world scene near the end of the age. Apart from the Pope, several contemporary characters have been suggested as candidates for the title of Antichrist that include Bill Clinton, Henry Kissinger, the Prince of Wales and Barack Obama. I would not be surprised if sooner or later someone tries to include Donald Trump. (This author does not believe any of the aforementioned qualify and it **seems to me that if you don’t agree with a prominent world figure, the now accepted practice** in some circles is to call them Antichrist or Hitler in order to delegitimise them in the court of public opinion) Many people have attempted to apply the necessary wisdom that the verse about the beast calls for and have suggested several names down through the ages.

In both ancient Greek and Hebrew, letters also represented numerals, their values assigned according to the order of the alphabet, *alpha* in Greek and *aelph* in Hebrew for example, have the numerical value of 1. By adding these values, words could be represented by the sum of their numbers. This iteration of numbers and numeration of letters was known as *isopsephism* by the Greeks and *gematria* by the Jews.

Thus they would have a number that represented a name if the corresponding letters were added up as numerals. It appears that down through the ages the presupposition was that the number of the name of the beast would add up to 666, as long as the name was written in the Greek language. This presupposition has failed to produce any likely character that would fulfil all that is written in the Word of God about this coming world leader.

In the writings of Irenaeus about 170AD, we find an article about the Antichrist where he talks at length about the number 666. In his treatise on the subject (see below), it seems he was bewildered that some thought the number to be 616 and so he presented a discourse in support of the number 666. The number 616 actually features prominently in a number of ancient documents, which it appears Irenaeus had become aware of.

Around 2005, a papyrus fragment (now called P115) was discovered, **that gives the beast’s number as** 616. This fragment is the oldest known manuscript containing Revelation 13:18. Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (classified as one of the four great uncial codices), also has 616 written in full: *hexakosioi*

deka hex (lit. six hundred and sixteen). The writing in full effectually eliminates any idea that it may have been a simple copying error in the Codex. 616 is also found in other early writings such as the Latin version of Tyconius and in an ancient Armenian version. (A codex is the term that is applied to the early manuscripts that began to be bound with pages like our modern books. This was a departure from the use of scrolls. Uncial refers to the type of script used around the fourth century, sort of rounded uppercase)

Here is a translation from the writings of Irenaeus on the subject of the number 666 and its association with the Antichrist:

Irenaeus: Against Heresies, 5.29.2

Since he sums up in his own person all the commixture of wickedness which took place previous to the deluge, due to the apostasy of the angels. For Noah was six hundred years old when the deluge came upon the earth, sweeping away the rebellious world, for the sake of that most infamous generation which lived in the times of Noah. And [Antichrist] also sums up every error of devised idols since the flood, together with the slaying of the prophets and the cutting off of the just. For that image which was set up by Nebuchadnezzar had indeed a height of sixty cubits, while the breadth was six cubits; on account of which Ananias, Azarias, and Misaël, when they did not worship it, were cast into a furnace of fire, pointing out prophetically, by what happened to them, the wrath against the righteous which shall arise towards the [time of the] end. For that image, taken as a whole, was a prefiguring of this man's coming, decreeing that he should undoubtedly himself alone be worshipped by all men. Thus, then, the six hundred years of Noah, in whose time the deluge occurred because of the apostasy, and the number of the cubits of the image for which these just men were sent into the fiery furnace, do indicate the number of the name of that man in whom is concentrated the whole apostasy of six thousand years, and unrighteousness, and wickedness, and false prophecy, and deception; for which things' sake a cataclysm of fire shall also come [upon the earth].

Such, then, being the state of the case {with Noah's age at the deluge and the dimensions of Nebuchadnezzar's image}, and this number {i.e., 666} being found in all the most approved and ancient copies [of the Apocalypse], and those men who saw John face to face bearing their testimony [to it]; while reason also leads us to conclude that the number of the name of the beast, [if reckoned] according to the Greek mode of calculation by the [value of] the letters contained in it, will amount to six hundred and sixty and six; that is, the number of tens shall be equal to that of the hundreds, and the number of hundreds equal to that of the units (for that number which [expresses] the digit six being adhered to throughout, indicates the recapitulations of that apostasy, taken in its full extent, which occurred at the beginning, during the intermediate periods, and which shall take place at the end), I do not know how it is that some have erred following the ordinary mode of speech, and have vitiated the middle number.

His belief in the number 666 does not indicate any knowledge of who the Beast might be. In other writings he himself suggested a few names that the Greek letters added up to 666, but was not dogmatic about any of them. With regards to his support for the number 666, I can only see an example of **spurious exegesis being used to uphold his opinion and nothing of substance: Noah's age at the flood? The dimensions of Nebuchadnezzar's statue? He asserts that the number of the name of the beast is** according to the Greek mode of calculation without any explanation as to why that is; and this thought of his has become the tradition of the majority to this very day.

Irenaeus appeals to copying error when speaking of the number 616, a common objection offered by scholars who give no reason for their assertion. Why is 666 not a copying error as the fragment that contains verse 13:18 that has 616 is considered to be the oldest known? He makes reference to some unknown characters who he claims saw John face to face bearing testimony to 666 being the correct

number. However, this same Irenaeus makes the same appeal to apostolic authority for his claim to his statement that Jesus was near fifty years old when he died on the cross.

Against Heresies, Book 2, Chapter 22:5

Now, that the first stage of early life embraces thirty years, and that this extends onwards to the fortieth year, every one will admit; but from the fortieth and fiftieth year a man begins to decline towards old age, which our Lord possessed while He still fulfilled the office of a Teacher, even as the Gospel and all the elders testify; those who were conversant in Asia with John, the disciple of the Lord, [affirming] that John conveyed to them that information. And he remained among them up to the times of Trajan. Some of them, moreover, saw not only John, but the other apostles also, and heard the very same account from them, and bear testimony as to the [validity of] the statement.

His whole premise with the rest of his article goes on to suggest that Jesus had to experience every age in order to redeem every age. This suggestion dismisses the symbolism of the spotless lamb being offered rather than a spotless sheep and puts aside the clear teaching of the Gospels which show he died at around 33½ years old. Although Irenaeus certainly defended some fundamentals of the faith, when it came to things he had no knowledge of he resorted to unreliable witnesses and falsehoods to support his viewpoints. Thus he has undermined his integrity as a reliable authority.

As a matter of fact, when you start exploring the writings of the ‘church fathers’ you find all sorts of nonsense mixed in with the truth.

Revelation 13:18 NKJV

“Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: His number is 666.”

By the way, the number is not six, six, six; but six hundred and sixty six.

This riddle about the identity of the beast is thought to have been forgotten almost as soon as it was written, seemingly because the mysterious number was assumed by succeeding generations to be calculated from the Greek or perhaps Latin.

However, much light has been shed on this subject by the discovery of one of the most renowned textual scholars of the 20th century; Bruce M. Metzger. In his book, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), he takes note of the reality of the different numbers on the two earliest papyrus fragments mentioned above, one with 666 and the other with 616. I guess he applied some wisdom, for this is what he found out:

When the Greek letters of Nero Caesar (Neron Kaisar) are transliterated into Hebrew (English equivalents nrwn qsr), the numerical value of these Hebrew letters equals 666. (nrwn qsr, 50 + 200 + 6 + 50 + 100 + 60 + 200). This calculation from the Hebrew was apparently suggested independently by four German scholars during the 1830s: 1831 (O. F. Fritsche), 1836 (F. Benary) and 1837 (F. Hitzig and E. Reuss): see Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p387

Some scholars have pointed out that arriving at 666 is only possible if one uses a not so commonly used alternative spelling of the Greek and not how it is normally spelt. However, this alternative form of **spelling Nero’s name is found in the writings of the Jewish Talmud and a contemporary Aramaic scroll** from Qumran and seeing as the writer of Revelation used many Hebraisms it is highly likely he was familiar with the Hebrew Language and the writings of the Talmud and therefore could have spelt it the Jewish way. Most scholars agree that John of Patmos was Jewish.

However, the normal spelling of the Greek would result in the number being 616 (nrw qsr instead of nrwn qsr). **AND if the Latin (rather than the Greek) spelling of “Nero Caesar” is transliterated into Hebrew (nrw qsr), the value of the letters of the name also comes to 616.** It hardly needs to be said that Nero was Roman and not Greek.

In their contention with the Preterist Viewpoint, the Futurists and Historicists are quite correct in **pointing out that none of the ‘church fathers’ have made any connection between 666 or 616 with Caesar Nero.** This fact is used to discredit the suggestion that perhaps the calculation of the number could come from a transliteration into Hebrew. **To begin with, this definition of who is classified as an ‘early church father’ is a construct of the Catholic Church. That aside, much to the dismay of these particular scholars, an early church group known as the Donatist Christians produced a document that presents clear evidence that the number 616 was associated with Nero from earliest times.** The Donatists were targeted for persecution by the Catholic Church for their purist moral stance and rejection of Mariolatry (perhaps these are the real church fathers), and being declared heretics by the heretics, their writings were suppressed. However, this particular Donatist document has survived and the ancient writing of these early Christians has been translated from Latin and is available for all to see. Type the following into your search engine: *THE NERO THEORY & THE PROBLEM OF PATRISTIC EVIDENCE.*

Here is the pertinent quote from the article in Latin and in English:

LATIN:

hic Nero ipse est, cuius nomen Iohannes in apocalpsin vocavit DCXVI. hic sapientia vertitur, ut computetur per eras nomen eius, qui dicitur, “antichristus sic”

Here is the calculation of the Roman numerals:

D=500; C=100; X=10; V=5; I=1 Total: 616.

ENGLISH:

This Nero is he whose name John called in the Apocalypse 616. Here wisdom is used that the name of him who is thus called ‘Antichrist’ may be calculated through letters.

A closer look at the rest of the original document appears to show them coming to their conclusion via a convoluted calculation with Latin numeration rather than through Hebrew. Nevertheless, it does show that from the annals of history there is at least one attempt at calculating Caesar Nero and coming up with 616. Because this document is several decades after the writing of Revelation, perhaps they were unaware of the calculation via the Hebrew transliteration.

Revelation 13:18 MY Version

Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: His number is 616 or 666 . . .

The case for Caesar Nero being the intended character is compelling. The case for the number being 616 is also compelling. Caesar Nero is the only contemporary character that can account for both 666, and its alternative 616. If it is simply a coincidence that these two numbers, 616 and 666, which are the result of calculating the number of Caesar Nero, transliterated from two languages into Hebrew, or from both of the alternative Greek spellings, the odds against are extraordinarily remote. Scholars advocating 666 seek to dismiss these details with various explanations but the reality of the presence of the alternative number 616 will not go away. There is a real papyrus fragment. Just type in Papyrus 115 into your search engine and you will soon find photos of the fragment online.

The above information seems to support the claims of the Preterists as Nero's reign was before the fall of Jerusalem which aligns with the Preterist assertion that Revelation was written before 70AD. Many Preterists believe that the writer of the Apocalypse was directly speaking about Nero in a veiled manner, suggesting it was hidden in this fashion to prevent persecution of anyone found with this document. Certainly any polemic against Nero would have been met with certain death.

Revelation 13:17b NKJV
... the number of his name.

Preterist advocates assert that saying the words, "number of his name" in the previous verse would have been a clearly understood hint to Jews familiar with the practice of *gematria* with Hebrew letters to readily calculate who the writer was referring to. Attempting to calculate his name using the letters of the commonly spoken Greek language would not have produced 616 or 666.

Preterists also argue that for the number of the beast to have had any significance for a reader of the first century AD, it would have to refer to a contemporary historical figure whose name they could calculate, after all, the book was originally addressed to them.

Revelation 1:1 NKJV
The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John

Revelation 1:11 NKJV
"...saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last," and, "What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

Revelation 22:6 NKJV
Then he said to me, "These words are faithful and true." And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show His servants the things which must shortly take place.

As mentioned above, scholars agree that John of Patmos used many Hebraisms which reveal that he was a Jew and was thus familiar with the Hebrew language. It is therefore, no stretch of the imagination to suggest that Nero is in fact the targeted character and the Jewish recipients would have been able to apply the wisdom necessary to decipher the veiled message. The Preterists contend that the entire prophecy is addressed to seven known churches and John of Patmos advises his readers that the things he is prophesying were to take place shortly. A literal approach to the above Scriptures certainly agrees with the Preterist View as far as that particular point is concerned.

However, critics argue that if the writer of the Apocalypse was prophesying the downfall of the beast and the destruction of Rome, then his prophecies have utterly failed, for the historical events clearly **show that after Nero's death, the Roman oppression continued and the victory the Preterist interpreters** envisage for the closing chapters of Revelation do not in any way correspond with what actually happened in history no matter how much you stretch the imagination. Jerusalem remained under Roman domination for about 600 years, and the Roman Empire, after moving its capitol from Rome during the reign of Emperor Constantine, lasted until Constantinople was overrun by the Moslem hordes in 1453AD. (The Muslims renamed the city Istanbul (or Istanbul) as it is known to this day) These facts of history simply do not yield to any kind of manipulation that would accommodate such an interpretation of the Book of Revelation.

Another objection to the Preterist interpretation of Revelation is that the seals, trumpets and bowls have many precise details that simply cannot be reconciled with the history of that period of time leading to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans: all the fish dying in the sea (Revelation 16:3); a third of the waters turned bitter and many dying from it (Revelation 8:10-11); what appears to be a description of a meteor striking the sea (Revelation 8:8); springs and rivers turning to blood (Revelation 16:4-6); etc. etc. The starkest example is the following passage from Revelation Chapter 9:

Revelation 9:1-12 NKJV

Then the fifth angel sounded: And I saw a star fallen from heaven to the earth. To him was given the key to the bottomless pit. 2 And he opened the bottomless pit, and smoke arose out of the pit like the smoke of a great furnace. So the sun and the air were darkened because of the smoke of the pit. 3 Then out of the smoke locusts came upon the earth. And to them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power. 4 They were commanded not to harm the grass of the earth, or any green thing, or any tree, but only those men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. 5 And they were not given authority to kill them, but to torment them for five months. Their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it strikes a man. 6 In those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will desire to die, and death will flee from them.

7 The shape of the locusts was like horses prepared for battle. On their heads were crowns of something like gold, and their faces were like the faces of men. 8 They had hair like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth. 9 And they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the sound of chariots with many horses running into battle. 10 They had tails like scorpions, and there were stings in their tails. Their power was to hurt men five months. 11 And they had as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, but in Greek he has the name Apollyon.

12 One woe is past. Behold, still two more woes are coming after these things.

To find the event in history, when the people who did not have the “seal of God on their foreheads” suffered from these attacks from the bottomless pit, is frankly impossible. Let's be honest with ourselves. To be able to truly consider the fifth trumpet, with its locusts that have tails like scorpions, and all the other visions of the seals, and the trumpets and the bowls, to be symbolic of any events in history would require one to descend into the realm of the hallucinogenic. Yet the vivid imaginations of the Preterist Viewpoint demand that we engage in this departure from reality.

2 Timothy 1:7 NKJV

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

1 Corinthians 14:33 NKJV

For God is not the author of confusion . . .

Apart from the Full Preterist view of the resurrection and their difficulty in reconciling the prophecies with history, Preterists do have some reasonably plausible conjectures: about Nero being the targeted

identity for the Mark of the Beast; about the earlier date that Revelation was probably written; and their understanding of the Kingdom of God being spiritual and not of this world as being the foundation for their rejection of a physical presence of Jesus in Jerusalem for a thousand years.

However, the Preterist Viewpoint, whether Partial or Full, advocating an interpretation of the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem as being the fulfillment of the writings of John of Patmos and the teaching of Jesus on the end of the age, requires one to indulge in pure fantasy rather than the **documented history which is God's 'acid test' on prophecy. Therefore the Preterist Viewpoint should** indeed be past consideration (pun intended) and dismissed as an interpretive deception.