

PARTIAL PRETERISM

Preterism is the eschatological view that the “end times” prophecies of the Bible have already been fulfilled. So, when we read what the Bible says about the tribulation, we are reading history. Preterism is divided into two camps: full (or consistent) preterism and partial preterism. Full preterism takes an extreme view that all prophecy in the Bible has been fulfilled in one way or another. Partial preterists take a more moderate approach, and many partial preterists consider full preterists to be guilty of heresy.

Those who hold to partial preterism believe that the prophecies in Daniel, Matthew 24, and Revelation (with the exception of the last two or three chapters) have already been fulfilled and were fulfilled no later than the first century AD. According to partial preterism, there is no rapture, and passages describing the tribulation and the Antichrist are actually referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the Roman emperor Titus. Partial preterists do believe in the return of Christ to earth and a future resurrection and judgment, but they do not teach a millennial kingdom or that Israel as a nation has a place in God’s future plan. According to partial preterists, the Bible’s references to “the last days” are speaking of the last days of the Old Jewish Covenant, not the last days of the earth itself.

In order for partial preterists to maintain their position, they insist that the book of Revelation was written early (before AD 70). They must also use an inconsistent hermeneutic when interpreting prophetic passages. According to the preterist view of the end times, chapters 6–18 of Revelation are highly symbolic, not describing any literal events. Since the destruction of Jerusalem did not involve the wholesale destruction of sea life (Revelation 16:3) or agonizing darkness (verse 10), these judgments are interpreted by the preterist as purely allegorical. However, according to preterists, chapter 19 is to be understood literally—Jesus Christ will physically return. But chapter 20 is again interpreted allegorically by preterists, while chapters 21–22 are understood literally, at least in part, in that there will truly be a new heaven and new earth.

No one denies that Revelation contains amazing and sometimes confusing visions. No one denies that Revelation describes many things figuratively—that’s

the nature of apocalyptic literature. However, to arbitrarily deny the literal nature of select portions of Revelation is to destroy the basis of interpreting any of the book literally. If the plagues, witnesses, beast, false prophet, millennial kingdom, etc., are all allegorical, then on what basis do we claim that the second coming of Christ and the new earth are literal? That is the failure of preterism—it leaves the interpretation of Revelation to the opinions of the interpreter.

Those who hold to partial preterism also do not read Matthew 24 in a literal sense. Christ spoke of the destruction of the temple (Matthew 24:2). But much of what He described did not occur in AD 70. Christ speaks of that future time as one of “great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:21–22). Surely, this cannot be applied to the events of AD 70. There have been worse times in the history of the world since then.

The Lord also says, “Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory” (Matthew 24:29–30). In order for the events of these two verses to have already occurred, Jesus Christ must have returned bodily in AD 70—but He did not. The partial preterist believes that these verses do not refer to a bodily return of Christ but to an appearing of His judgment. However, this is not what a normal, literal reading of the text would lead anyone to believe. It is the “Son of Man” whom people see, not just His judgment.

Partial preterists also appeal to Matthew 24:34 where Jesus speaks of “this generation.” They say that Christ was referring to those living at the time He spoke the words recorded in that chapter; thus, the tribulation had to occur within about 40 years of His statement. However, we believe that Jesus was not referring to the people of His day but to the generation who would witness the events recorded in Matthew 24:15–31. That future generation will witness all of the swiftly moving events of the last days, including Christ’s bodily return (verses 29–30).

The partial preterist viewpoint leads to a belief in amillennialism (or post-millennialism) and is associated with covenant theology. Of course, it rejects dispensationalism. But its main problem is its inconsistent hermeneutic and its allegorizing of many biblical prophecies that are better understood literally. While partial preterism is within the scope of orthodoxy, it is not the majority view among Christians today.