

# LETTER EXPLAINING MY REJECTION OF HYPER-PRETERISM

By Ashby L. Camp

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Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Here is a sketch of some of my reasons for rejecting the hyper-preterism to which you subscribe.<sup>1</sup> I have little hope of changing your mind, given your conviction that you already know the truth of this matter, but perhaps I can provide further insight into why so many across the theological spectrum oppose hyper-preterism and even consider it heretical. It is not because we are ignorant of the basic arguments; it is because we think they are flawed and result in a denial of the true Christian hope. This puts the doctrine in some very bad company (2 Tim. 2:17-18; 1 Tim. 1:19-20).

There is no need for you to respond to this letter. I just want you to appreciate that I am familiar with the doctrine you are promoting and am as settled in my convictions about it as you are, if not more so. I have no desire to spend more time on this subject. Should I ever feel I need additional instruction in hyper-preterism, I will pursue it on my own through the available published resources. I mean no offense by that; it is simply how I study things.

According to hyper-preterists, all prophecy pertaining to the end times was fulfilled in the first century. This includes the Second Coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and the arrival of the eternal state (the new heavens and earth). This supposedly occurred at the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Since that time, the Christian hope has been fully realized. The world as it has been since A.D. 70 will continue without end.

At a minimum, this claim contradicts the following propositions that I am convinced are truths revealed in Scripture:

1. *The Second Coming of Christ will be a personal, bodily return not merely a figurative, spiritual return.*

Acts 1:9-10 says that, while the disciples were watching, Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him from their sight. Two angels (men in white robes) then appeared to them and in v. 11 stated, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus,

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<sup>1</sup> Hyper-preterism also is known as full preterism, consistent preterism, strict preterism, transmillennialism, Hymenaeism, and pantelism. It differs from partial or moderate preterism in that the latter accepts that the Second Coming, the general resurrection, and the final judgment are still future. I say you subscribe to hyper-preterism because you labeled yourself "a full-blown preterist." If your brand of hyper-preterism varies from the norm, take whatever applies.

who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in this way, in the manner in which you saw him going into heaven." As Jesus was *seen* ascending bodily into heaven, so he will be *seen* coming bodily from heaven.<sup>2</sup> This same truth is reflected in Mat. 24:30, Mk. 13:26, Lk. 21:27, 1 Thess. 4:16, 2 Thess. 1:7-8, 1 Jn. 3:2, and Rev. 1:7.

In Jn. 14:3, Jesus consoles his disciples regarding his imminent return to heaven by assuring them, "I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be." When someone who is departing says simply that he will come again, no one would think he meant that he will come again in some figurative sense. And certainly no one would take figuratively Paul's assertion that "the Lord *himself* will descend from heaven" (1 Thess. 4:16). The addition of the word "himself" stresses the personal nature of the return.

## *2. The resurrection of the dead at the Second Coming of Christ is a bodily resurrection.*

Jesus was, of course, raised bodily from the grave. That is why his body was not in the tomb (e.g., Mat. 28:5-7; Mk. 16:6; Lk. 24:1-6; Jn. 20:1-9). Other texts leave no doubt about the physicalness of his resurrection body (e.g., Mat. 28:9; Lk. 24:39-43; Jn. 20:17, 20, 24-28; Acts 10:41).

Unlike others who were brought back to life (1 Ki. 17:22; 2 Ki. 4:32-35; Mk. 5:35-43 [and parallels]; Lk. 7:11-16; Jn. 11:1-45; Acts 9:37-40, 20:9-10), Jesus was not simply resuscitated to live again as one subject to death. He was raised with a body that had been transformed into an immortal body of glory that was suited for eternity. As Paul says in Rom. 6:9, "We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has mastery over him."

Christ's resurrection was the "firstfruits" of the end-time resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20-23). His resurrection serves as a pledge on God's part of the final end-time harvest.<sup>3</sup> Our resurrection is tied to his, so much so that in 2 Cor. 4:14 Paul says "we

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<sup>2</sup> For a thorough analysis of various hyper-preterist attempts to avoid this meaning, see Keith A. Mathison, "Acts 1:9-11 and the Hyper-Preterism Debate" at <http://www.preteristsite.com/docs/mathisonacts.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> As David Garland explains [Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 705-706]:

The term "firstfruits" does not simply signify Christ's chronological precedence as the first one raised from the dead, however. It conveys that his resurrection is the "first of a kind, involving the rest in its character or destiny" (Parry 1926:223). That is why Paul says that Christ is "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep," not "of the resurrected." His resurrection was not simply God's miraculous intervention that rescued him from death, but was "the beginning of God's renewal of all things" (Perkins 1984: 318; cf. Schrage 2001: 160). The concept of firstfruits expects that "the rest *must* follow" (Weiss 1910: 356). Holleman (1996:204) contends that by choosing this term, "Paul presents Jesus' resurrection as the beginning of the eschatological resurrection." As the firstfruits, Christ's resurrection is a pledge of the full harvest of resurrection to come: "The resurrection bodies . . . of the redeemed . . . are to correspond to and flow from

know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also *with Jesus*." We are all the same harvest. He is the "*firstborn* from the dead" (Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5). And we, as part of the Lord's resurrection harvest, likewise will receive glorified and immortal bodies in our resurrection (Rom. 8:11, 23, 29; 1 Cor. 15:35-49; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Jn. 3:2).<sup>4</sup>

That is why Jesus said in Jn. 5:28-29 that "an hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good to a resurrection of life, but those who have done evil to a resurrection of judgment." Though Lazarus was raised to the same life he had known before his death, that event leaves no doubt as to the meaning of "coming out" in Jn. 5:28-29. It refers to a bodily exit from the grave (Jn. 11:43-44). This is the raising up that will occur on the last day (Jn. 6:39-40, 44, 54).

Moreover, in Mat. 10:28 the Lord told the disciples, "And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But instead fear the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell." This makes clear that the punishment of hell is experienced in a bodily state. The same idea is expressed in Mat. 5:29-30. Since those who come out of their graves to a resurrection of judgment (Jn. 5:28-29; see also, Acts 24:14-15) do so bodily, and since the resurrection of the righteous and the unrighteous is nowhere distinguished in terms of its bodily nature, it is apparent that those who come out of their graves to a resurrection of life also do so bodily.

The bodily nature of the resurrection also is evident in 1 Cor. 6:12-17, where Paul rejects the effort of some in Corinth to rationalize having sex with prostitutes.<sup>5</sup> They justified that behavior on the basis that the body was created for sex and that the physical was merely temporary so it could not be of consequence to God. To support this idea, they apparently were taking comments Paul had made regarding freedom from dietary restrictions and applying them to sexual restrictions.

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Christ's in the same way that the harvest corresponds to and flows from its first fruits" (Kreitzer, DPL 11).

<sup>4</sup> Paul does not say in 1 Cor. 15:44 that our natural bodies will be transformed into "*spirits*"; he says they will be transformed into "spiritual *bodies*." They are bodies that have been transformed so as to be suitable for the eternal state. They are "spiritual" not in the sense of noncorporeal (made of spirit) but in the sense of supernatural, in the sense they are imperishable, glorious, and powerful. This is recognized by a broad range of scholarly commentators (e.g., C. K. Barrett [Harper's New Testament Commentaries], W. Harold Mare [Expositor's Bible Commentary], Gordon Fee [New International Commentary on the New Testament], Richard Oster [College Press NIV Commentary], Craig Blomberg [NIV Application Commentary], Anthony Thiselton [New International Greek Testament Commentary], David Garland [BECNT], and Craig Keener [New Cambridge Bible Commentary]). The claim that 1 Cor. 15:50 means that no physical substance can enter the eternal state is incorrect. Paul was speaking of "flesh and blood" *as presently constituted*, as subject to weakness, decay, and death. Our bodies cannot enter the eternal state without being transformed into imperishable, glorious, powerful, and immortal bodies. As Blomberg remarks [NAC, 316], "'Flesh and blood' in verse 50 was a stock idiom in Jewish circles for 'a mere mortal' and does not contradict what Paul has already stressed, that resurrection experience is a bodily one (cf. Jesus' reference to having 'flesh and bones' in Luke 24:39)."

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., C. K. Barrett [HNTC], W. Harold Mare [EBC], Gordon Fee [NICNT], Richard Oster [CPNIVC], Craig Blomberg [NIVAC], Anthony Thiselton [NIGTC], and Craig Keener [NCBC].

The Corinthians were quick to adopt Paul's comment that "all things are lawful for me," but they were misusing it. Not only had he said that in the context of eating "idol meat" sold in the marketplace (see 10:23-26), a morally neutral matter, but it also needed to be qualified even in that context. Paul doesn't dispute the statement (because he said it), but he adds the necessary qualifications that not all things are beneficial and that he will not be mastered by anything. Just because something is lawful does not mean that it is always right to do it. When the exercise of one's freedom will damage another person, one needs to abstain from the conduct one otherwise is free to do. This is developed in 1 Corinthians 8-10.

Regarding the freedom to eat meat previously sacrificed to idols, Paul may have said something like "The food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, and God will do away with both the one and the other." That would be consistent with his view of the immortal, resurrected body as having no need for the stomach and food for continued life. Then again, this may be a purely Corinthian formulation, one with which Paul essentially agrees. Whatever the source, the Corinthians were applying this slogan to the body's sexual appetite, and Paul flatly rejects that application.

The Corinthian argument apparently went like this: (a) All things are permitted for satisfying one's appetite for food. After all, the stomach and food were created for one another. The stomach and food have no eternal significance because God is going to do away with them both in the end. (b) By analogy, all things are permitted for satisfying one's appetite for sex. After all, the body and sexual release were created for one another. The body and sexual release have no eternal significance because God is going to do away with them both in the end.

Paul denies their argument at both points: the body was *not* created for sexual release but for the Lord (and he adds that the Lord is for the body to maintain a parallel with their argument) and the body is *not* destined for destruction but for resurrection, the proof of which is the Lord's resurrection. The body was created for the Lord in the sense that the work of redemption includes the whole person, which includes the body. The body is not irrelevant for future existence; it is destined for resurrection and therefore is "for the Lord" in the present. The Lord is for the body in the sense that he gave himself for the body as part of his redemptive work. In vv. 15-17 Paul applies his reformulation of their slogan, "the body is *not* for fornication but for the Lord," to their going to prostitutes.

The bodily nature of the resurrection promised at Christ's return is confirmed by the fact the Lord's resurrection was followed by the bodily resurrection or reanimation of selected Old Testament saints (Mat. 27:52-53).<sup>6</sup> Whether those saints were genuinely resurrected or merely revived like Lazarus, their rising bodily in association with the

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<sup>6</sup> As Craig Blomberg [NAC, 421] points out, Mat. 27:52-53 probably should be punctuated, "The tombs also were opened. And the bodies of many holy people who had fallen asleep were raised, and having come from the tombs after his resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many."

Lord's resurrection certainly testifies to the effect of his resurrection on the bodies of the dead. It foreshadows our bodily resurrection in association with Christ's (1 Cor. 15:23).

This is all clear enough in its own right, but when put in the context of first-century Judaism, the attempt to define the resurrection hope as something other than the restoration of bodily life is hard to take seriously.<sup>7</sup> Here is how N. T. Wright, after a thorough examination of the evidence, summarizes the concept of resurrection in ancient Judaism in his highly acclaimed tome *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 201, 204:

'Resurrection', with the various words that were used for it and the various stories that were told about it, was never simply a way of speaking about 'life after death'. It was one particular story that was told about the dead: a story which in the *present* state of those who had died would be replaced by a *future* state in which they would be alive once more. As we noted at the end of chapter 1, 'resurrection' was a life *after* 'life after death', the second of two stages in the post-mortem programme. Resurrection was, more specifically, not the *redefinition* or *redescription* of death, a way of giving a positive interpretation to the fact that the breath and blood of a human body had ceased to function, leading quickly to corruption and decay, but the *reversal* or *undoing* or *defeat* of death, restoring to some kind of bodily life those who had already passed through the first stage. . . .

Nothing in the entire Jewish context warrants the suggestion that the discussion in 1 Corinthians 15 was about 'resurrection *in heaven*', or that the Jewish literature of the period 'speaks of both a resurrection of the body and a resurrection of the spirit without the body'.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. *The final judgment at the Second Coming of Christ is universal.*

Matthew 13:40-43, 25:31-46, Acts 17:30-31, 2 Tim. 4:1, 2 Pet. 3:4-13, and Rev. 1:7, 20:11-15 make clear that the final judgment is a worldwide phenomenon that encompasses all persons, living and dead. Even the angels, at least the rebellious ones, will be included (1 Cor. 6:3; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6). It is the day on which every knee shall bow to pay Jesus the homage due his name (Phil. 2:9-11). It strains credulity beyond the breaking point to claim that the fall of Jerusalem qualifies. As horrific as it was, it was a local judgment on the nation of Israel.

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to deny that "resurrection" could be used figuratively; it is to claim that any such figurative usage would have to be indicated by the writer. Otherwise, he would be understood as referring to the restoration of bodily life.

<sup>8</sup> See also, Murray J. Harris, *Raised Immortal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 39; Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 180; and Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973) 70.

Even if one claims that all the dead somehow were judged at that time, despite their not being raised bodily, people who were living in other parts of the world were unaffected. And certainly the believers living at the time were not transformed into immortal and imperishable persons in keeping with the promise of 1 Cor. 15:51-53 and 1 Thess. 4:15-17.

4. *There will be no sin, suffering, decay, or death in the eternal state (the new heavens and new earth).*

Mat. 13:40-43 and 2 Peter 3:3-13 makes clear that the final judgment results in a state that is radically discontinuous from what previously existed. What arises from the destruction of the present reality is so different that it is called a new heavens and new earth (2 Pet. 3:13; see also, Isa. 65:17, 66:22; Rev. 21:1-3).<sup>9</sup>

Rev. 21:1-4 makes clear that the new heaven and new earth will be free from death, mourning, crying, and pain. The curse will have been lifted (Rev. 22:3), and creation itself will have been freed from its slavery to decay (Rom. 8:20-21). Death is destroyed at Christ's return (1 Cor. 15:20-26), it is swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:54-55), because it yields its prey in the general resurrection of the dead and ceases to have any effect in the eternal state. The victory Christ won over death at his first coming is fully realized at his return.

The eternal state envisioned by hyper-preterists is the world since A.D. 70, a world of sin, death, decay, sorrow, and pain. This not only contradicts the biblical portrait of the eternal state, it renders incomprehensible the eagerness with which Christians in the New Testament longed for the Lord's return (1 Cor. 1:7, 16:22; 2 Tim. 4:8; Tit. 2:12-13; Rev. 22:20). If that return meant continued existence in a fallen world of suffering and death, but with a severely punished Israel, it is inconceivable that it would have been the dominant hope of the New Testament church. Indeed, the fiercest

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<sup>9</sup> There is a debate over whether the present earth will go out of existence and be replaced with a completely new earth or whether the present earth will continue in existence in a radically transformed state. Within Protestantism, Lutheran scholars tend to favor replacement, whereas Reformed scholars tend to favor renewal. See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 1160. I believe the entire creation is going to be renewed or redeemed (see Rom. 8:18-25). It will be radically altered but it will still in some sense be "this creation" that comes out on the other side of that transforming process. I think Grudem has it right when he states (p. 1160-1161):

The Reformed position seems preferable here, for it is difficult to think that God would entirely annihilate his original creation, thereby seeming to give the devil the last word and scrapping the creation that was originally "very good" (Gen. 1:31). The passages above that speak of shaking and removing the earth and of the first earth passing away may simply refer to its existence in its present form, not its very existence itself, even 2 Peter 3:10, which speaks of the elements dissolving and the earth and the work on it being burned up, may not be speaking of the earth as a planet but rather the surface things on the earth (that is, much of the ground and the things on the ground).

persecutions of the church occurred after A.D. 70.<sup>10</sup> That is like being in the pan and longing for the time in the fire.

My belief that the four propositions stated above are truths revealed in Scripture is reinforced by the fact Christians throughout history have understood the Bible this way. Charles Hill, an accomplished historian of the early church, examines thirteen noncanonical Christian documents that were written between A.D. 85 and 140 in "Eschatology in the Wake of Jerusalem's Fall" in Keith A. Mathison, ed., *When Shall These Things Be?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004). He concludes (p. 88):

We thus conclude our short survey of Christian writings up to the year 140. Authors whom we have not included, but who may possibly have written by this time, are the authors of *2 Clement* and the *Epistle of Diognetus*. Before long, we would reach Justin Martyr's apologetic works, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, *5 Ezra*, Athenagorus of Athens, Theophilus of Antioch, Melito of Sardis, Dionysius of Corinth, and the *Epistle of Vienne and Lyons*, which would bring us to the time of Irenaeus. If we would continue our survey with a look at these authors, we would find only more of the same; that is, the situation would only get worse for those searching for ancient hyper-preterism. . . . But despite a fairly rich variation in detail in the wide spectrum of Christian writings from this period, one has to be impressed with the monolithic futurism, or, better, "inaugurated futurism" of early, post-70 Christianity. Everywhere we see a strong conviction that the risen and ascended Christ, who now rules from his heavenly throne (e.g., *1 Clem.* 50.3; Justin, *Dial.* 34; *Mart. Pol.* 9.3; 21.2), will return bodily on the clouds of heaven and bring about a resurrection, a great judgment of the living and the dead, and a definitive "visitation" (*1 Clem.* 50.3; Polycrates, *Epistle to Victor*, quoted in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.5) or establishment of God's kingdom in a new world. There are those in this period, to be sure, who deny outright a resurrection of the body at the last day and who use resurrection language solely or mainly to refer to the resurrection unto new life in baptism or in conversion. These are the people we call Gnostics, as Tertullian tells us: "No other persons, indeed, refuse to concede to the substance of the body its recovery from death, than the heretical inventors of a second deity" (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 2.2).

This theological consensus continued throughout the centuries, as demonstrated by the fact it is reflected in the historical creeds. See, e.g., Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., "The Historical Problem with Hyper-Preterism" in Keith A. Mathison, ed., *When Shall These Things Be?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004) 20-33. Hyper-preterism, on the

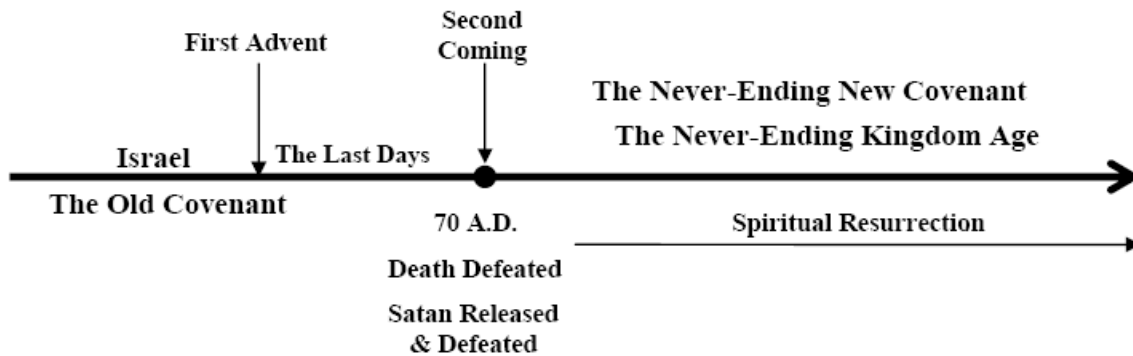
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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the persecutions under Decius and Diocletian. That is especially odd in light of the hyper-preterist claim that Satan was thrown in the lake of fire in A.D. 70.

other hand, can only be securely dated from the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Kenneth A. Mathison writes in *When Shall These Things Be?* (p. xv):

The origins of hyper-preterism are somewhat difficult to trace. There have always been men in the church who have believed that some New Testament prophecies were fulfilled in the first century. Many, for example, have taught that Jesus predicted the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple – an event that occurred in A.D. 70. But systematic and total preterism is difficult to find anywhere in the church until the nineteenth century. Although the view may have been held at an earlier date by some obscure individual or group, one of the first open proponents of hyper-preterism was John Humphrey Noyes (1811-86), the founder of the Oneida Community.

In addition to contradicting the orthodox propositions stated above, hyper-preterists commonly claim that the old covenant was in force until A.D. 70, at which time the new covenant went into effect. They believe this post-70, new-covenant era is what the New Testament calls "the age to come." They also believe the phrase "last days" is used in the New Testament to refer to the last days of the old covenant, which period they define more specifically as the time between the crucifixion and A.D. 70. Michael W. Adams highlights these points with the following chart:



I disagree with nearly all of this. The new covenant clearly was in effect before A.D. 70. As the Mosaic covenant was established in association with the blood of sacrifices (Ex. 24:3-8), so the new covenant was established by Jesus' sacrificial death (Mat. 26:28; Lk. 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). The first covenant was inaugurated with blood; the new covenant was inaugurated with more precious blood (Heb. 9:15-18).

Certainly the new covenant was in effect when Hebrews was written. Jesus already was serving as High Priest of that covenant (Heb. 4:14, 5:8-10, 6:20, 7:12, 18-19, 22, 28, 8:1-13, 9:15-28, 10:11-18, 12:22-24). So if Hebrews was written before A.D. 70,

<sup>11</sup> Your claim that hyper-preterism is affirmed in the New Testament begs the question. One cannot assume the very fact in dispute (whether the Bible affirms hyper-preterism) and then cite that assumption as evidence in one's favor. If hyper-preterism were indeed affirmed in Scripture, one would expect to find that view reflected in the writings of the early church. The fact one does not find it is strong corroboration that hyper-preterists are misreading the texts.



which seems likely,<sup>12</sup> then the new covenant was in effect before that date. If, on the other hand, Hebrews was written after A.D. 70, then the Second Coming could not have been in A.D. 70 because Heb. 9:27-28 shows that it was still future.

Paul mentions in 2 Cor. 3:5-6 that he and his companions are ministers of a new covenant, in contrast to the old covenant (which apparently the intruders were emphasizing). He says the new covenant is superior to the old in that the old covenant is one of letter which kills, whereas the new covenant is one of Spirit which gives life.

Paul is suggesting that Jews who seek to bind the law of the old covenant, the law of Moses, in the age of Christ are misusing it by making it an end in itself, the basis of one's righteousness before God. Christ is the fulfillment of the old covenant. God has "moved on" in his program, so to speak. Those who refuse to move with him into the new era, those who continue to require compliance with terms of an obsolete covenant, are pursuing their own agenda of righteousness rather than God's and will die as a result.

The present reality of the new covenant also is evident in the Hagar and Sarah allegory in Gal. 4:21 – 5:1. Paul says that those Galatians who want to be under the law are not paying attention to what the law says. It is written in the law that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman (Hagar) and one by the free woman (Sarah). The son of the slave woman, i.e., the son born into slavery (Ishmael), was born according to the flesh, according to human decision and effort. The son of the free woman, i.e., the son born into freedom (Isaac), was born through God's promise, not by human doing. Paul states expressly that these women are two covenants (v. 24).

Hagar stands for Mount Sinai and the old covenant, including the law, which issued from that mountain. As Hagar's son was born into slavery, so are the sons of the old covenant. They are in slavery under the law. Thus, Hagar corresponds to present Jerusalem, to those insisting on the law. But Christians are sons of the free, heavenly Jerusalem (v. 26), implicitly represented by Sarah and the covenant she symbolizes. Paul could not say that if the new covenant was not yet in effect.

The fact the Mosaic covenant was no longer in effect in Paul's day is clear from the fact the Mosaic law, the set of laws that were part of that covenant, was no longer binding. Sabbath regulations were no longer binding, being merely a shadow anticipating the coming of Christ (Col. 2:16-17; Rom. 14:5-6). Food laws were no longer binding (Rom. 14:1 – 15:13; 1 Cor. 10:23 – 11:1), and circumcision was no longer obligatory (1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 2:3-5, 5:2-6, 11-12, 6:12-13; Phil. 3:2). The Mosaic covenant was intended to be in force only until Christ, the seed of promise, arrived (Gal. 3:15 – 4:7). Christ's sacrifice was the end of the law that was a dividing wall between Jew and Gentile and thereby brought Jew and Gentile together into one body (Eph. 2:11-16). That is why Paul, a Jew, could declare that he was not under the Mosaic law (1 Cor. 9:20).

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<sup>12</sup> See the discussion in D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 605-608.

The "age to come" is the age that comes after the end of the present age. It is an age that will be characterized by an absence of wickedness (Mat. 13:40-43, 49-50), which is why this age is called "the present *evil* age" (Gal. 1:4). Those who enter that age cannot die and will no longer marry (Lk. 20:34-35). The one who blinds the minds of unbelievers so they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ is called "the god of *this age*" (2 Cor. 4:3-4) because he will have no part in the age to come (Mat. 25:41; Rev. 20:10). In the words of theologian George Ladd, "In brief, this age is the period of Satan's activity, of human rebellion, of sin and death; the age to come, introduced by the parousia of Christ, will be the age of eternal life and righteousness, when Satan is destroyed and evil swept from the earth."<sup>13</sup> That certainly does not fit the state of this world since A.D. 70.

Hyper-preterists are correct in thinking that "the last days" is the period between the Lord's first and second comings. Their error is in thinking that the Second Coming occurred in A.D. 70. We are still in the last days because the parousia is still future.

Beyond all of these problems, hyper-preterism is absolutely dependent on the unlikely dating of certain New Testament writings. Specifically, it *requires* Revelation and 1 John to have been written before A.D. 70. This is necessary because 1 Jn. 2:28, 3:2 and Rev. 1:7, 22:20 make clear that the Lord's return is still future. If they were written after A.D. 70, then the return to which they refer was after the fall of Jerusalem.

I will not rehearse all the arguments regarding the dating of those documents. Suffice it to say that, though a case can be made for dating Revelation before A.D. 70, "for a long time the scholarly majority has held that Rev was written during the reign of Domitian (81-96) who ruled after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and signed himself as Lord and God, and could be considered Nero come back again."<sup>14</sup> As early as A.D. 180, Irenaeus, who was in a position to have direct information about the matter (in that he claimed to have heard Polycarp, who had talked with John the apostle), dated the writing "toward the end of the reign of Domitian." Most scholars also date 1 John in the 90s.<sup>15</sup>

Hyper-preterists are driven to deny the historical understanding of the Scriptures pertaining to the Second Coming and its related events and to reject other aspects of generally accepted Christian theology because they are certain the Bible affirms that the Second Coming would occur in the first century. Rather than allow the novelty of that

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<sup>13</sup> G. E. Ladd, "Age, Ages" in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 36.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 805-806. Likewise, G. K. Beale declares in *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 4, "The consensus among twentieth-century scholars is that the Apocalypse was written during the reign of Domitian around A.D. 95."

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990) 879; Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 389-390; D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 676.

premise and its inconsistency with the common understanding of a host of Scriptures to cause them to doubt it, they make the premise a procrustean bed into which all other texts must be forced. All the passages that speak of the Second Coming and its related events in a way that is inconsistent with a first-century fulfillment are implausibly reinterpreted to remove that inconsistency. The texts that indicate the new covenant was in existence prior to A.D. 70 are treated likewise. And all the evidence indicating a post-70 date for Revelation and 1 John is slighted.

Perhaps the key text for hyper-preterists is Mat. 24:34, where Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things happen." They are certain this is a declaration that the Second Coming would occur in the first century, but the matter is not as clear as they claim. It is quite possible, indeed I think likely, that "all these things" refers not to the Second Coming but to hardships in the age of distress, to the "birth pangs of the Messiah" that *precede* that coming.<sup>16</sup>

In Mat. 24:1-2, Jesus pronounces doom on the temple. As he indicated in chapter 23, what Israel does with him, not the temple, determines the fate of the temple and of Israel nationally. The disciples mistakenly assume that the destruction of the temple is linked with the end of the age, the consummation. That is why they ask in v. 3 when "these things" (destruction of the temple) will be *and* what will be the sign of his coming and of the end of the age. They see them as a single event.

Jesus warns them (vv. 4-8) not to be taken in by the claims of false Christs made in the context of coming wars, famines, and earthquakes. This type of upheaval and distress *is not the end but only the beginning* of "birth pains," the beginning of that period of distress of unspecified duration that precedes the Messiah's coming.

Jesus says (vv. 9-14) that during this period of distress Christians will be persecuted and hated; they will fall away, betray and hate each other, and be misled by false prophets. There will be an increase in wickedness, and the love of most will grow cold. Despite this, the gospel will be preached to the whole world. Only at the end of this period of undefined length will the end come.

Therefore (v. 15), when they see "the abomination that causes desolation," which Lk. 21:20 indicates is Jerusalem coming under attack, they must not misunderstand and think it is time for their redemption. Rather than straightening up and raising their heads as they are to do at the time of their redemption at the Second Coming (Lk. 21:27-28), in this instance they must *flee* because "the abomination that causes desolation" signals not the end, as their conflated question shows they mistakenly believed, but a very severe episode of distress within this age of distress, within "the birth pangs of the Messiah" (vv. 15-21). It is a warning to them not to be fooled into thinking the attack on Jerusalem was the Lord's promised return.

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<sup>16</sup> For much of the following, I am indebted to D. A. Carson, "Matthew" in Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 8:488-508.

In describing the distress of Jerusalem's fall as unequaled from the beginning of the world until now and not to be equaled again, Jesus probably was using a hyperbolic formula that emphasized the severity of the suffering, something like our "that was *the worst* \_\_\_\_\_ ever" (see Ex. 10:14, 11:16; Jub. 16:8; Ps. Philo. 19:16; also compare Josh. 10:14 with Ex. 8:13; Num. 14:20; 2 Ki. 6:18).<sup>17</sup> It is just possible, however, that he was speaking literally. Carson says (p. 501), "There have been greater numbers of deaths – six million in the Nazi death camps, mostly Jews, and an estimated twenty million under Stalin – but never so high a percentage of a great city's population so thoroughly and painfully exterminated and enslaved as during the Fall of Jerusalem." To that one must add the anguish of divine rejection evident in the destruction of the city and temple that were central to Judaism.

In vv. 22-28, Jesus says that this age of distress – these days of wars, famines, persecution, hatred, and false prophets – will become so bad that if it were allowed to continue, if God in his providence did not cut it short, no one would survive.<sup>18</sup> Christians must continue to be on guard against false Christs in this time of intensified birth pangs. Not only will the distress be heightened, thus increasing the tendency to follow a false deliverer, but the false Christ(s) and false prophet(s) will be performing miracles. When the Lord returns, it will be clear to all. The false Christs proliferating in the end are like vultures gathering over a carcass (the condemned world).

Immediately after the "birth pangs of the Messiah," there will be a divine temporal judgment on the ungodly (vv. 29-31; see Revelation 6-20). The language of heavenly upheaval in v.29 is drawn from Isa. 13:10 and 34:4. The first refers to God's judgment against Babylon; the second refers to God's judgment against "all the nations" but particularly Edom. Similar language is used elsewhere of God's judgment within history on cities and nations (e.g., Ezek. 32:7; Joel 2:10; Amos 8:9). This judgment is part of a complex that will culminate in the Second Coming of Christ, which includes the final judgment and the end of this age.

When they see the "birth pangs of the Messiah" ("all these things"), they can know that they are in the penultimate stage of history. The Judgment/Parousia is the next major step in God's redemptive purpose (vv. 32-35). They will live to see these birth pangs, to see the general upheaval and the destruction of Jerusalem, but that does not mean they will see the Judgment/Parousia. In other words, the birth pangs must occur within their generation, but they need not end within that time. Only the Father knows how long the birth pangs will last (vv. 36-42).

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<sup>17</sup> See G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993) 419.

<sup>18</sup> Carson writes (p. 502): "Many problems in interpreting the Olivet Discourse relate to the assumption that 'those days' [in v. 22] refers to the period described in vv. 15-21 and also to v. 29. But there are excellent reasons for concluding that vv. 22-28 refer to the general period of distress introduced by vv. 4-14 and that therefore 'those days' refers to the entire period of which vv. 15-21 are only one part – the 'great distress' (v. 21)."

This makes the most sense to me, but it is not the only interpretation of Mat. 24:34 in which Jesus is not promising to return in the first century.<sup>19</sup> And at least one scholar has argued that, even if Jesus *did* prophesy a first-century return, the fulfillment was delayed because an implicit contingency was not met.<sup>20</sup> So those who claim that the only choice regarding Mat. 24:34 is hyper-preterism or denying the inerrancy of Scripture are, at the very least, exaggerating.

Hyper-preterists also rely heavily on Mat. 10:23 and 16:27-28. Lest I turn this into a book, I will just quote these texts and provide a brief statement of some of the interpretive options that do not place the Second Coming in A.D. 70.

Mat. 10:23 – "But whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to another; for truly I say to you, you will not finish [going through] the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes."

a. The "coming" refers to his coming figuratively in judgment on the Jews, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem, which coming differs from his literal coming at the consummation of the age (the Second Coming).

b. The "coming" refers to his coming to the disciples (rejoining them) after having sent them out.

c. The "coming" refers to his coming proleptically (in a preview of his Second Coming) in the Transfiguration (see comments on Mat. 16:27-28).

d. The "coming" refers to his figurative coming in his vindication as the Messiah at his resurrection.

e. The "coming" refers to his coming up to the throne of God in his ascension.

f. The "coming" refers to the Second Coming, but "[going through] the cities of Israel" refers to the perpetually incomplete Jewish mission (in keeping with Matthew's emphasis on Israel's obstinance).

Mat. 16:27-28 – "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and will then repay every man according to his actions. Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

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<sup>19</sup> Some others are summarized in Keith A. Mathison, "The Eschatological Time Texts of the New Testament" in Keith A. Mathison, ed., *When Shall These Things Be?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004) 178-182.

<sup>20</sup> Richard L. Pratt, "Hyper-Preterism and Unfolding Biblical Eschatology" in Keith A. Mathison, ed., *When Shall These Things Be?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004) 121-154.

- a. Some who were present (Peter, James, and John) would not die before seeing (in the Transfiguration) a preview of the future parousia.<sup>21</sup>
- b. Some who were present would not die before they saw Jesus resurrected.
- c. Some who were present would not die before seeing the events of Pentecost.
- d. Some who were present would not die before seeing Jesus come figuratively in judgment on the Jews, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem, which coming differs from his literal coming at the consummation of the age (the Second Coming).

Other texts that speak of the Lord's coming as soon or near (e.g., Rom. 13:11-12; Jas. 5:8-9; 1 Pet. 4:7) are best understood in a salvation-historical framework. It is not a statement of absolute timing but an indication of a perspective with which this future event of uncertain timing is to be viewed (no one knows the time of the parousia – Mat. 24:36; Mk. 13:32). Since Jesus' death, resurrection, and Pentecost, each generation lives on the verge of Christ's return. The next and final step in salvation history is the consummation, and though we do not know the day or hour of his coming, we know he could come swiftly in any generation.

Here is how Douglas Moo explains the concept in *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 224:

[W]hat is crucial is to understand this "nearness" in the appropriate temporal framework: salvation history. With the death and resurrection of Jesus and pouring out of the Spirit, the "last days" have been inaugurated. This final age of salvation will find its climax in the return of Christ in glory. But – and here is the crucial point – the length of the age is unknown. Not even Jesus knew how long the "last days" would last (cf. Mark 13:32). What this means is that the return of Christ, as the next event in the salvation-historical timetable, is, from the time of the early church to our own day, "near," or "imminent." Every generation of Christians lives (or should live!) with the consciousness that the *parousia* could occur at any time and that one needs to make decisions and choose values based on that realization. So it was as true in James's day as it is in

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<sup>21</sup> There is much in favor of this interpretation, which accounts for its popularity among scholars. The careful noting by all the Synoptic writers of the time between Jesus' promise and the Transfiguration event indicates a clear literary or thematic link between the two suggesting that they intended the Transfiguration to be understood in some sense as the fulfillment of the promise. The fact only three of the disciples were privy to the vision explains the reference in the promise to "some," and the emphasis in the Transfiguration account on the visual aspect correlates with the reference in the promise to "see." This interpretation also satisfies the usual meaning of the conjunction *heōs*, which implies that those who saw the kingdom come would die at some point thereafter. In addition, Peter understood the Transfiguration as a foreshadowing of the parousia (2 Pet. 1:16-19). The common criticisms of this view can be satisfactorily answered.

ours: we need to *be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.*

Robert Shank expresses it this way in *Until: The Coming of Messiah and His Kingdom* (Springfield, MO: Westcott Publishers, 1982), 395-396:

Said a professor of theology whom I know

*The apostolic Church believed Christ would return in their day. He did not, and they were wrong. Other generations of the Church believed that Christ would come in their day, but time proved them all wrong. If we expect Christ to return in our day, time will no doubt prove us wrong.*

Not at all. In every generation of the Church, all who expected Christ to return in their time were right, and all who did not were wrong, terribly *wrong*. Christ, the apostles, and the entire NT enjoin upon us no other attitude than to expect Jesus to return in our time. Whether he returns in our day is God's responsibility; whether we expect his return is our responsibility, for which we must give account. Whether he returns in our generation or not, we are wrong if we fail to expect him. In every generation of the Church, "the Lord is at hand." This is the time frame of the NT, including the Revelation.

This is far more reasonable to me than the radical overhaul of historic Christian theology proposed by hyper-preterists. You apparently disagree, but maybe something in this missive will be food for thought. I believe the doctrine you are advocating is more dangerous than you realize, and I am too settled in my mind to be recruited to your point of view.

[Final paragraph removed because of personal references.]

Sincerely,

Ashby