

"Shreds of Preterism" Among First-Century Writers

by [Gary DeMar](#)

May 23, 2003

The Early History of Preterism: Part Three

My preterist friends have not been able to find any early preterists in the early church. I would never say that there is no one in the early church who taught preterism. . . . Don't be foolish enough to say that nothing is out there in church history, because you never know. . . .[\[1\]](#)

Since Ice does not quote from any first-century documents to make his case that none of them offer a "shred of evidence that anyone in the first century understood these prophecies to have been fulfilled when preterists say they were,"[\[2\]](#) I am left to speculate how Ice might argue his case if he had placed first-century documents into evidence. It's hard to interact with phantoms, but I am left with no choice.

In reality, there are only four first-century Christian writings available for study today: The Didache, 1 Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Shepherd of Hermas. Of the four, only 1 Clement and the Didache allude to Matthew 24. Ice demands that a "preterist has to prove that the early church writings interpreted passages such as Matthew 24:27, 30, 25:31, Acts 1:9–11, Revelation 1:7,[\[3\]](#) and 19:11–21 as fulfilled in A.D. 70."[\[4\]](#) They may not, as he suggests, prove preterism, but they certainly do not prove dispensationalism. In fact, a study of the documents of the period will show that only selected prophetic texts are quoted, not enough to offer dogmatic support any prophetic position. Even so, Ice assumes that these documents (which he never cites) cannot be used to support preterism because they do not quote certain passages. Are we to assume, following Ice's logic, that if a writer during this period did not comment on Matthew 1:23, a passage dealing with the virgin birth, that he did not believe in the virgin birth? In the end, Ice's argument from history is an argument from silence.

Much of the debate over preterism comes down to when a document was written. This is especially true for the book of Revelation.[\[5\]](#) If a document was written prior to the destruction of Jerusalem which occurred in A.D. 70, then any statement about future prophetic events could be a reference to that event. The burden of proof is on the futurist to prove otherwise.

A "Shred of Evidence" from the Didache

The Didache, also known as "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," is probably the oldest surviving extant piece of non-canonical, extra-biblical literature that the church has to study. It claims to have been written by the twelve apostles, but this cannot be proved.[\[6\]](#) While a copy of the full text of the Didache was not discovered until 1873, there are references to it in Clement of Alexandria's *Miscellanies*,[\[7\]](#) Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*,[\[8\]](#) and Athanasius's *Festal Letter*.[\[9\]](#)

In Didache 16, there are 12 references to Matthew 24–25 (24:4, 10–13, 21, 24, 30, 31, 42, 44, and 25:31). The crucial time text of Matthew 24:34 ("this generation will not pass away") is not quoted, but a form of Matthew 24:30 is: "The Lord shall come and all His saints with Him. *Then shall the world see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven*" (16.7–8). John F. MacArthur, whose chapter in *The End Times Controversy* uses the Didache as a defense for futurism, claims that the "document proves that those who actually lived through the events of A.D. 70 regarded Matthew

24:29–31—and the entire Olivet Discourse—as yet-unfulfilled prophecy." [10] Nothing in the Didache says anything about "living through the events of A.D. 70." Nothing in the Didache indicates that the destruction of the temple has taken place.

The verses quoted from Matthew 24–25 in Didache 16 obviously refer to future events from the perspective of the author(s). Of course, if the Didache was written prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, then preterists have their "shred of evidence" that Ice says does not exist. MacArthur maintains that "most scholars believe it was written near the close of the first century, most likely after A.D. 80." [11] He does not offer a source for his assertion. The dating of the Didache, like many of these very early documents, is debatable. But there is good reason to place its composition early, prior to the destruction of the temple.

Didache authority Kurt Niederwimmer, after a thorough study of the document, concludes that "the date of the *Didache* is a matter of judgment." [12] In addition to MacArthur's "most scholars," none of whom he cites, other scholars believe that the Didache was composed before A.D. 70. In the authoritative work *The Apostolic Fathers*, we read the following:

A remarkably wide range of dates, extending from before A.D. 50 to the third century or later, has been proposed for this document. . . . The *Didache* may have been put into its present form as late as 150, though a date considerably closer to the end of the first century seems more plausible. *The materials from which it was composed, however, reflect the state of the church at an even earlier time.* The relative simplicity of the prayers, the continuing concern to differentiate Christian practice from Jewish rituals (8.1), and in particular the form of church structure—note the twofold structure of bishops and deacons (cf. Phil. 1:1) and the continued existence of traveling apostles and prophets alongside a resident ministry—*reflect a time closer to that of Paul and James (who died in the 60s) than Ignatius (who died sometime after 110).* [13]

The definitive work on the Didache was written by the French Canadian Jean-Paul Audet who concluded "that it was composed, almost certainly in Antioch , between 50 and 70," [14] "contemporary with the first gospel writings." [15] In an earlier edition of *The Apostolic Fathers* we read a similar conclusion: "In his very thorough commentary J.-P. Audet suggests about A.D. 70, and he is not likely to be off by more than a decade in either direction." [16] Even liberal scholars, who tend to date all New Testament documents late, acknowledge the evidence for an early date for the Didache. For example, Stephen J. Patterson comments that the trend is to date the document early, "at least by the end of the first century or the beginning of the second, and in the case of Jean-P. Audet, as early as 50–70 C.E." [17] Andrew Louth writes that many scholars would date the Didache "earlier than the New Testament itself." [18] Aaron Milavec's 1000-page study of the Didache also places its composition sometime between A.D. 50 and 70. [19]

So then, if the *Didache* was written prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, as many scholars suggest, then its use of Matthew 24–25 to describe events that were yet to take place, including "the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 24:30), makes perfect sense given a preterist interpretation of the Olivet Discourse. Ice has his "shred of evidence."

But let's follow MacArthur's assumption of a post-A.D. 80 date. All that could be said is that the *unknown* author(s) of the Didache believed that the events of Matthew 24:29–31 refer to as yet-unfulfilled prophecy. When we don't know who wrote the Didache, when it was written, or where it was written, [20] it is flimsy evidence indeed to claim so much authority for the document. To call these early writers "some of the most astute students of Scripture," as MacArthur does, shows little familiarity with the entire corpus of their anonymous works. For example, MacArthur quotes Justin Martyr as someone "who was probably born in the first century and certainly knew many believers who had lived through the events of A.D. 70." [21] Justin was obviously a futurist, but to say that he

knew many who lived through the events of the destruction of Jerusalem is highly speculative seeing that he wasn't born until around A.D. 100 and didn't become a Christian until around A.D. 130, sixty years after the Roman siege of Jerusalem. This is another argument from silence. We only know what Justin wrote, and even that's a matter of interpretation.

But is MacArthur willing to accept Justin's views on the church as the true Israel, a devastatingly anti-dispensational position? In his *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. 160), Justin argued:

For the true spiritual Israel, and descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham (who in uncircumcision was approved of and blessed by God on account of his faith, and called the father of many nations), are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ, as shall be demonstrated while we proceed.[\[22\]](#)

Justin argued later in the same work that the prophets foretold the removal of Israel and the blessing of another Israel. [\[23\]](#) Again, "As . . . Christ is the Israel and the Jacob, even so we, who have been quarried out from the bowels of Christ, are the true Israelitic race." [\[24\]](#) Justin explicitly said that the promise of land made to Abraham is fulfilled in the Church's inheritance of heaven: "along with Abraham we shall inherit the holy land, when we shall receive the inheritance for an endless eternity, being children of Abraham through like faith." [\[25\]](#) These early writers and their documents are a mixed bag doctrinally.

A "Shred of Evidence" from 1 Clement

Clement (A.D. 30–100), also known as *Clemens Romanus* to distinguish him from Clement of Alexandria who died in the third century, is noted for his letter to the Corinthians (1 Clement). The letter is commonly dated around A.D. 96, but there is good reason to date it earlier. George Edmundson, in his Bampton Lectures for 1913, writes "that the probable date of the epistle is the early months of 70 A.D." [\[26\]](#) The strongest argument for an early A.D. 70 date is that Clement states that temple sacrifices were still being offered in Jerusalem. This means the temple, which was destroyed in late A.D. 70, was still standing when Clement wrote his letter:

Not in every place, brethren, are the continual daily sacrifices offered, or the freewill offerings, or the sin offerings or the trespass offerings, *but in Jerusalem alone*. And even there the offering is not made in every place, but before the sanctuary in the court of the altar; and this too through the high-priest and the aforesaid ministers (41.2).

T. J. Herron, at the Tenth International Conference on Patristic Studies in Oxford, "challenged the traditional date of 95–96, which has been based almost entirely on the testimony of Eusebius. . . . Clement's use of the present tenses in chapters 40–41 is taken by Herron to signify that the temple in Jerusalem was still standing when Clement wrote." [\[27\]](#)

To give further support for an early A.D. 70 date is Clement's comments about what was taking place in "our generation," specifically the martyrdom of Peter and Paul. Keep in mind that Clement was born around A.D. 30 and would have been forty years old in A.D. 70, making him a part of the "this generation" of Matthew 24:34:

But not to dwell upon ancient examples, let us come to the *most recent* spiritual heroes. Let us take the noble examples furnished in *our own generation*. Through envy and jealousy, the greatest and most righteous pillars [of the Church] have been persecuted and put to death. Let us set before our eyes the illustrious apostles. Peter, through unrighteous envy, endured not one or two, but numerous labours and when he had at length suffered martyrdom, departed to the place of glory due to him. Owing to envy, Paul also obtained the reward of patient endurance, after being seven times thrown

into captivity, compelled to flee, and stoned. *After preaching both in the east and west, he gained the illustrious reputation due to his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world, and come to the extreme limit of the west,* and suffered martyrdom under the prefects. Thus was he removed from the world, and went into the holy place, having proved himself a striking example of patience. [\[28\]](#)

Remember Ice's criterion for establishing preterism in the first century: All we need is "a shred of evidence." There are a couple of items in this section of Clement's letter that point to a pre-A.D. 70 fulfillment. As opposed to "ancient examples" to make his case, Clement instead dwells on "the most recent spiritual heroes," in this case, Peter and Paul who "suffered martyrdom" during the Neronian persecutions of the mid-60s. These are "noble examples furnished in *our own generation*," Clement writes.

Jesus predicted in the presence of Peter: "They will deliver *you* to tribulation, and will kill *you*. . ." (Matt. 24:9; cf. John 21:18–19). Edmundson summarizes the argument by asking why Peter and Paul are cited as examples of martyrdom "if Clement had just passed through the persecution of Domitian" in the mid 90s? Why didn't Clement mention well-known Christian martyrs from his own era who suffered? "Is it conceivable that none of their examples should have been brought forward, but only those of an already distant persecution, whose memory more recent events must have tended to throw into the background?" [\[29\]](#)

Of Paul, Clement writes, "After *preaching* both in the east and west, he gained the illustrious reputation due to his faith, *having taught righteousness to the whole world,* and come to the extreme limit of the west." It was Paul's plan to go to Spain (Rom. 14:24 , 28). Compare this statement to what Jesus says in Matthew 24:14, a verse that LaHaye and Ice maintain has not been fulfilled.

"And this gospel of the kingdom shall be *preached in the whole world* for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come."

Clement, following the language of Jesus and Paul, states that the "whole world" (*kosmos*) had been "taught righteousness." Paul writes to the Romans that their "faith is being proclaimed *throughout the whole world [kosmos]*" (Rom. 1:8). At the end of Romans we read that the gospel "has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith" (16:26). To the Colossians we learn that, according to Paul, the gospel "was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister" (Col. 1:23; cf. 1:6 [*kosmos*]).

A "Shred of Evidence" from James the Brother of Jesus

In *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, written in the fourth century, we learn of an incident that led to the martyrdom of James the brother of Jesus. The original story comes from the second-century historian Hegesippus who wrote his notes on the history of the church between A.D. 165 and 175. As the story is told, when James was called on by a group of Scribes and Pharisees to establish what they believed was the truth of the claimed Messiahship of Jesus, Hegesippus reports James as stating that Jesus "is *about to come* on the clouds of heaven." [\[30\]](#) James continued: "Why do you ask me respecting Jesus the Son of Man? He is now sitting in the heavens, on the right hand of great Power, *and is about to come on the clouds of heaven.*" [\[31\]](#)

The Greek word *mellon*, "about to," "communicates a sense of immediacy." [\[32\]](#) "If the author had not wished to stress the immediate aspect of Christ's coming, he could still have stressed the certainty of Christ's coming with *erketai*, thereby omitting the immediate factor." [\[33\]](#) After hearing James' obvious allusion to Matthew 26:64, the officials of the temple cast him down from the "wing of the temple" and later stoned him and beat out his brains with a club. "Immediately after this,"

Hegesippus writes, "Vespasian invaded and took Judea ." [34] James the brother of Jesus believed that Jesus' coming was "about to take place." Hegessipus identifies the coming of Jesus "on the clouds of heaven" with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Conclusion

Ice and LaHaye get off on the wrong foot in their analysis of preterism. The historical argument is a death blow, or to use Mark Hitchcock's metaphor from his chapter on the dating of Revelation, "A Stake in the Heart" to their brand of futurism. The earliest historical sources, the Didache, 1 Clement, and the testimony of James, the brother of Jesus, demonstrate that preterism's history is a first-century history.

Endnotes:

- [1] Thomas Ice, "Update on Pre-Darby Rapture Statements and Other Issues": audio tape (December 1995).
- [2] Thomas Ice, "The History of Preterism," *The End Times Controversy: The Second Coming Under Attack*, eds. Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice (Eugene , OR : Harvest House, 2003), 39.
- [3] Ice, "The History of Preterism," 39. Revelation 1:7 is only quoted three times in the entire ante-Nicene corpus, none from first-century writings.
- [4] Ice, "The History of Preterism," 39.
- [5] Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* , 2nd ed. (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1998).
- [6] "It purports to be the Lord's teaching through the Twelve to the Gentiles." (Sherman E. Johnson, "A Subsidiary Motive for the Writing of the Didache," in Massey H. Shepherd and Sherman E. Johnson, eds., *Munera Studiosa: Studies Presented to W. H. P. Hatch on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* [Cambridge , MA : Episcopal Theological School, 1946], 122. Quoted in Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary*, trans. Linda M. Maloney [Minneapolis : Fortress Press, 1988], 3, note 14).
- [7] (*Miscellanies*, 1, 20, 100).
- [8] (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.25).
- [9] (*Festal Letter*, 39).
- [10] John F. MacArthur, Jr., "Signs in the Sky," *The End Times Controversy*, 112. "Signs in the Sky" originally appeared in John MacArthur, Jr., *The Second Coming: Signs of Christ's Return and the End of the Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), chap. 6.
- [11] MacArthur, "Signs in the Sky," 112.
- [12] Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, 53.
- [13] Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, [1992] 1999), 247–248. Emphasis added.
- [14] John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 323.
- [15] Jean-Paul Audet, *La Didachè: Instructions des Apôtres* (Paris: Gabalda, 1958), 187–210.
- [16] Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 247. Holmes references Audet, *La Didachè*, 187–206.
- [17] Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus: Thomas Christianity, Social Radicalism, and the Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1993), 173.
- [18] Andrew Louth, *Early Christian Writers* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 189.
- [19] Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Faith, Hope, and Life of the Earliest Christian Communities, 50–70 CE* (Mahwah , NJ : Paulist Press, 2003). Milavec

contends that the Didache is not dependent on Matthew's gospel: "Even in those instances where there is close verbal agreement [with Matthew], the logic and order of the *Didache* is openly in conflict with what one finds in Matt 24." (Aaron Milavec, "Synoptic Tradition in the Didache Revisited," Center for the Study of Religion and Society, University of Victoria [no date], 19. www.didache.info).

[20] Introductory comments to the Didache in Henry Bettenson's *Documents of the Christian Church*: "Discovered at Constantinople , 1875. Date uncertain; authorship unknown; provenance and importance disputed." (2nd ed. [New York : Oxford University Press, 1967], 64).

[21] MacArthur, "Signs in the Sky," 113.

[22] Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, XI. In *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:200.

[23] Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, CXXIII. In *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:261.

[24] Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, CXXXV. In *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:267.

[25] Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, CXIX. In *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:259.

[26] George Edmundson, *The Church in Rome in the First Century: An Examination of Various Controverted Questions Relating to Its History, Chronology, Literature and Traditions* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1913), 189.

[27] Charles E. Hill in *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids , MI : Eerdmans, 2001), 78, note 5. Hill writes that he is "not persuaded by Herron," but he does not give his reasons.

[28] 1 Clement 5.1–17. Emphasis added.

[29] Edmundson, *The Church in Rome in the First Century* , 191.

[30] William Cave, *Antiquitates Apostolicae: Or, the History of the Lives, Acts and Martyrdoms of the Holy Apostles or Our Saviour, and the Two Evangelists, SS. Mark and Luke*, 2 vols. in 1 (London: R. Norton for R. Royston, Bookseller to His most Sacred Majesty, 1677), 1:193

[31] *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History* , "The martyrdom of James, who was called the brother of the Lord," 2.23 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1958), 77–78. The same account can be found in volume 8 of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 763.

[32] Alan Patrick Boyd, "A Dispensational Premillennial Analysis of the Eschatology of the Post-Apostolic Fathers (Until the Death of Justin Martyr)," submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Theology (May 1977), 28.

[33] Boyd, 28. See *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 4th rev. ed., s.v. *mellow*, I.c.a., 502. This understanding of *mellow* refutes Ice's claim time words are used "as *qualitative indicators* (not chronological indicators) describing how Christ will return." (*End Times Controversy*, 35).

[34] *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History* , "The martyrdom of James, who was called the brother of the Lord," 2.23 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1958), 77–78. The same account can be found in volume 8 of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 763.

