



Hyperbole Considered

PRETERISM SOLVES TOO MANY PROBLEMS WITH HYPERBOLE

The preterist position takes as hyperbole many of the eschatological passages in Scripture that speak of the return of Christ. The problem is not that preterists think that some passages are hyperbolic; there is hyperbole in Scripture, but that they see hyperbole in most cases where serious objections are raised against their position. It could be replied that if a passage is hyperbolic that is what it is. However, it does appear that there is an inconsistent assignment of passages to the hyperbole category simply because they do not fit the preterist view. As will be seen below, any biblical interpretation that lacks a clear set of objective criteria by which it can be evaluated eventually devolves into anarchy. Supporters of that view will tend to use almost any justification to maintain their position, sometimes to the harm of the integrity of the biblical text.

Hyperbole is defined as, “an exaggeration or extravagant statement used as a figure of speech”. So to say, ‘he was as big as an ox’ is hyperbole because the person being spoken of would have to be large but likely not the same size and weight as an ox. Implicit in hyperbole is the requirement that there be an extravagant figure of speech and that the figure of speech reflects qualities that exist in the thing or situation being described in an exaggerated way.

COMPARING MATTHEW 24 AND LUKE 21 IN THE PRETERIST APPROACH

The passages in Matthew 24 and Luke 21 provide a clear example of the way the preterist approach does harm to the biblical text. In Matthew 24 there are a series of statements that are all taken as hyperbole by preterists. We will use the preterist interpretation of these passages as the basis for our discussion.

24:21 I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.

While the damage done in 70 AD to the city and sanctuary were substantial, the temple substructure was not literally destroyed in a way that caused every single stone to be displaced. It is hyperbole to say that not one stone would be left upon another.

24:17 Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house.

This verse describes the urgency of the need to leave. Preterists view this as referring to the period right before the destruction of Jerusalem. It is hyperbole because the urgency to leave is great but not such that one literally could not stop in one's house to gather a few belongings before leaving.

24:18 Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak.

Again, this passage speaks of the urgent need to leave the city. The need to get out of the city is serious but this is hyperbole because it is not literally true that someone working in the field could not go into the city to get some things before escaping to the mountains.

24:20 Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath.

This verse also reflects urgency. It is hyperbole because it would have been possible for a person to leave at any time from 68 AD when the Romans left Jerusalem to the point in 70 AD before the Romans returned. This kind of urgency could occur right before the destruction of Jerusalem but it is primarily language designed to convey the importance of leaving the city before it was destroyed.

24:21 For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again.

This verse is hyperbole because the destruction of Jerusalem was not literally the worst destruction even among the destructions in the Holy Land. But the destruction is so significant with the temple being destroyed and not rebuilt that the language about the destruction is hyperbole but is justified.

24:22 If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.

This is hyperbole because it was not literally true that not a single person would have survived the destruction of Jerusalem if the



days had not been cut short. Rather, this is a great and terrible destruction that kills many.

24:24 For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible.

This is hyperbole because the false christs and false prophets did a number of tricks that deceived people at the time. These signs were not literally great signs and miracles except to those people at that time who were deceived by the trickery of these minor magicians.

24:30 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.

This passage is hyperbole because the language is not intended to be taken literally. The Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky is figurative language that describes a great judgment from God not including the literal seeing of a visible sign in the sky or seeing the Son of Man in the sky.

24:31 And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

This passage is hyperbole because the angels do not literally gather the elect physically and there is no literal trumpet call. These are figurative images that describe the salvation of people throughout the land.

The first problem that is evident in considering the verses above as hyperbole is that they more than exaggerate the situation they describe. The urgency to leave Jerusalem may be great when the Romans return, but before that the Jews had more than a year to leave the city. The urgency described is not, if you are irresponsible and remain in the city long after you know you should have gone, then it will be important to flee right away. It appears that the urgency is something unavoidable by those who know the day is coming. Why else would Jesus say to pray that the coming will not be on a Sabbath or in winter? For those in the 70 AD situation, when the Romans leave, get out! You don't need to pray about Sabbaths and winter in the 70 AD scenario. But Jesus calls on His people to pray that this urgent event will not occur on a Sabbath or in winter, seemingly pointing to an event so sudden and unanticipated that on seeing the abomination that causes desolation set up

on a wing of the temple (connected by preterists to the Roman desecration of the temple) the people should respond by fleeing. If this referred to 70 AD, it would appear that during the Roman attack was a bad time to flee. In contrast the language in Luke 21 makes it clear that the people should flee when they see Jerusalem surrounded by armies. This promotes the people leaving at the end of 68 AD not when it is too late and the Roman armies have returned.

The portions of Matthew 24 viewed as literal by preterists are simply those texts that describe ordinary circumstances. Verses 3-13 describe famines, wars and persecutions that could be applied to any age. It is of some concern that so much of Matthew is considered hyperbole, but perhaps that kind of language is typical of eschatological passages. If so, it would be expected that the parallel passages would have the same level of hyperbole. But that is not what is found.

Luke 21, while viewed as containing a few hyperbolic elements, is interpreted by preterists literally throughout most of the passage. The only hyperbole in Luke 21:12-24 is verse 18, "But not a hair of your head will perish" and all interpreters would agree that it is hyperbole. This raises a question. Why are the parallel sections of Matthew 24:15-28 and Luke 24:12-24 so different? Why is it that one is apparently filled with hyperbole and the other has almost none? It is thought that both passages are describing the same teaching session. It should be expected that both passages would accurately record what Jesus taught. So how can it be that one gospel writer records a hyperbole laden teaching session and the other records teaching that is clear and literal and contains almost no hyperbole when Jesus is teaching on the same topic?

It appears that the answer is that Jesus is not teaching on the same subject in the two parallel passages. In some cases, parallel passages do contain different events and different teachings. Events found in the same relative location in the gospels will sometimes come from different times in Jesus' life or emphasize different elements of Jesus' teaching within a single teaching session. Luke 21:12-24 is clearly speaking of the 70 AD destruction in literal terms. But Matthew 24:15-28 could never be thought of speaking of the same events in any literal sense. While it is proposed that the passage is filled with hyperbole, on what basis do biblical interpreters identify hyperbole in a passage?

HOW DO WE IDENTIFY PASSAGES THAT CONTAIN HYPERBOLE?

If the Matthew passages contain hyperbole there must be some indication within the text that Jesus was using imagery to describe an extreme situation. So what are the indicators that Jesus is doing this and what objective criteria do we use to recognize when this is Jesus' intent? Is there a certain phrase or alignment of words that



provides the clue to the interpreter that a verse is to be understood as hyperbole? Are these phrases used elsewhere in the biblical text in a hyperbolic way? It seems that if Jesus used so much hyperbole in Matthew 24, it is possible other passages, that have traditionally been taken literally, could actually reflect this hyperbolic tendency in Jesus' teaching.

As one examines the preterist writings and listens to their teachings there is a deafening silence regarding objective criteria that could be used to identify hyperbolic passages. A number of preterists have written long articles about the phrase "coming on the clouds of heaven" which they understand to refer to God coming in judgment on a people. Even if these articles are correct in all their particulars (which can only be held if one accepts their presuppositions) the recognition of a particular piece of figurative language, in one verse in Matthew 24, does not provide a basis for recognizing other verses that use hyperbole.

As we ask preterists for objective criteria for identifying hyperbole we run into a problem. The problem is that there appears to be one single criterion used by preterists to recognize hyperbole in Matthew 24. Where the verse or verses do not literally fit what is described in Luke 21 regarding the 70 AD destruction of Jerusalem, the verses are presumed to be non-literal. So how can it be known that these verses are not to be understood literally? It can be known because a literal understanding discredits the preterist view.

This should cause anyone who affirms the authority of Scripture some concern. If the presupposed preterist view is incorrect and Luke and Matthew are speaking of different events, anyone who interprets the text in the preterist manner does violence to the text by using the concept of hyperbole to deny the clear teaching of Scripture. The reason that this should be of some concern is that the same technique could be used to deny other foundational doctrines.

Suppose a person wanted to maintain his conservative credentials but wanted to deny the Virgin Birth. One way to do this would be to take the verses that affirm Mary's virginity and call them hyperbole.

Matthew 1:18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 1:20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 1:22f All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" —which means, "God with us."

One could take Matthew 1:18, 20 and say that the phrase through the Holy Spirit or from the Holy Spirit is describing the child as blessed of God rather than having anything to do with the mode of conception. In this case the exaggeration of the hyperbole would be in making the child more holy or set apart to God than would be expected from a conception out of wedlock. We could then explain away Matthew 1:22f by saying Mary was a virgin but then became not a virgin, conceived and gave birth.

This kind of argument would do violence to the clear intent of the text. But if one came to the text already having determined to deny the Virgin Birth, it would not be difficult to find some argument to make the case. Even more seriously, the same could be done to deny the reality of the cross. Now let me be clear, I am not suggesting that preterists are denying the cross or the Virgin birth nor am I attributing to them any intentional denial of the truthfulness of the biblical text. What I am saying is that the clear teaching of Scripture could be undermined by the inappropriate attributing of hyperbole to passages intended by God to be understood literally.

So assigning a non-literal meaning to a statement in Scripture should be done with great care. Some clear marker or objective standard should be present that identifies a passage as containing hyperbole. That marker or standard cannot be that the clear teaching of the text denies some preferred interpretation. If the basis for saying that Matthew 24 is largely hyperbole is a predisposition for a preterist view, the support for that view had better be ironclad with strong textual support for the view. There should certainly not be any indication within the text that Luke could be talking about one thing and Matthew another if our interpretation denies the literal sense of Matthew, calls much of the passage figurative and requires it to conform to the clear teaching of Luke.

There are a couple of problems that should lead one to be cautious when comparing Matthew 24 and Luke 21. There are inconsistencies that should promote looking for answers outside of hyperbole when the passages are compared.

A careful examination of Matthew 24 and comparison with Luke finds that the teaching in Matthew 24:15-28 is closer to Luke 17:20-37 than Luke 21. If the language of Luke 17 is closer to Matthew 24 than Luke 21 questions are raised. Are the teachings in Luke 17 and Luke 21 largely identical? Do they reflect literal and hyperbolic versions of the same prophecy? Or is it more likely that Luke was recording two distinct teachings about two distinct events? If so, the effort to conform Matthew 24:15-28 to mean the



same thing as Luke 21:12-24 is an abuse of the biblical text.

Likewise, while Luke 21 and Matthew 24 begin and end in similar ways, the dissimilarities in the central sections could easily be attributable to a small phrase that begins the section in Luke 21:12. Verse 12, that begins the literal description of the 70 AD destruction of Jerusalem in Luke 21, is introduced with the phrase, “but before all that”. No similar phrase is used in Matthew 24. This phrase requires that the things being described in verses 5-11 follow the events described in Luke 21:12ff. It is possible that the “before all that” reference concludes in verse 19. However, it appears more likely that the opening section, that ends in verse 11 with the phrase “fearful events and great signs from heaven”, would be picked up and continued later in Luke 21 when the “before all that” insertion was completed. This theme is resumed in verse 25 rather than verse 20. If this observation is correct, then verses 20-24 would be included in the section that is “before all that”. This idea that what is interrupted in verse 11 would be continued later, picking up where it left off, appears to be intuitive. If the insertion is made up of verses 12-24, it requires that the 70 AD events including the taking of the Jews “to all the nations” and the fulfillment of the time of the Gentiles occurred before the signs in heaven and the Son of Man coming in glory.

If this is true it would, by itself, discredit the preterist view. The flow of Luke 21:12-24 does make a strong case against preterism, but this is not the only difficulty for that position. Matthew 24, when read in context, provides strong textual evidence against the preterist view. In Matthew 24, Jesus refers to Daniel 11 and 12. It is clear that Jesus is directing the reader to Daniel 11 and 12 because of multiple references to things found only in the vision in Daniel 10-12. Jesus refers to the abomination of desolation. This precise phrase is found only in Daniel 11. In the near context in Matthew 24 Jesus also almost directly quotes from Daniel 12:1f which is later in the same vision. The clear context of Daniel 11 and 12 is a time at the end of human history that includes the resurrection of the dead.

Daniel 12:1-4 At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge.

The one who sets up the abomination that causes desolation comes to his end in the preceding verse and Daniel 12:1 begins with “At that time...” So how would a preterist explain this connecting of Matthew 24 with a passage that speaks of the resurrection of the dead? According to Dr. Gentry who is one of the leading preterist teachers, the Daniel passage is hyperbole. Why is it hyperbole? Where is the clue that shows it to be hyperbole? It appears that the justification for calling the passage hyperbolic is that this text, in its literal sense, cannot be reconciled with the preterist view.

But this is an abuse of the text and of Christian theology. To believe in the resurrection of the dead is to desire to have your name in the book of life. Even if it could be held that there is no physical book of life but that it represents the list of those in God’s family, it could not be held that this passage is hyperbole. There is no exaggeration or extravagant language as required for hyperbole. The hope of all believers is that they will rise to everlasting life. This is a literal rather than figurative part of our faith and so can not be interpreted as hyperbole without denying a foundational element of our faith.

Any interpretive method, in any other area of theology that proposed to solve difficulties with the biblical text by denying the accuracy of the text would be rejected out of hand by most preterists. Efforts to support a theological view by taking supporting texts literally and conflicting texts figuratively would be rejected immediately by those in the biblical inerrancy camp for doing violence to the text. Yet this is the interpretive approach taken by preterists to support their position. Someone among the preterists needs to stand up and start questioning how hyperbole is used to support preterism. They need to define what objective standard can be used to identify hyperbolic passages. To maintain the status quo is to attack the integrity of the biblical text by solving all problems by denying that difficult texts are ever understood literally.