

Lack of Confirmation by Early Writers

If I claimed to be a Bible scholar, I suppose I would be terribly embarrassed by my inability to give definitive answers to all the serious questions raised by studious readers. From the beginning of my series of lessons on fulfilled prophecy, I have intended to involve you in an investigation of preterist eschatology rather than trying to feed you all the pre-digested answers. I do not have all those sought after answers.

I am convinced, however, that there is overwhelming evidence in the New Testament writings that the coming of the Lord and those events related to it transpired in the lifetime of some of Jesus' listeners. One may accept that great base of evidence without being able to point to and explain each detail that transpired or confirm it by uninspired writers. With this introduction, I will now quote from an inquiry that I received this week which will be the focus of this essay.

“Dear Cecil, It is with great interest I have been following your articles on the idea of Christ's return. I have heard about this before, but this is the most in-depth presentation I've encountered. But I am bothered by one aspect. I am not aware of any post-return written affirmation. It seems that the early church fathers in their writings would have mentioned such a spectacular event. Are you aware of any such evidence? I hope you will address this aspect in your presentation, as it remains for me a great stumbling block to my acceptance of this idea. Thanks for all your thoughts over the years. They are greatly appreciated! May God continue to bless you and yours,” Jim Abb.

No doubt, most of you also have questioned this point raised by Jim in Michigan (<jimabb@chartermi.net>). We are referring to the “church fathers,” those men who wrote after AD 70 and the last days of Judaism and the nation of Israel. None of the New Testament Scriptures were written after that historic development, for it is unthinkable that the downfall of God's chosen nation, Israel, which was the center of Bible history, would not even be mentioned by inspired historians. Does the failure of the church fathers to mention those historic developments indicate that they had not happened? That could be; but it is not proof. Other factors must be weighed before we reach such a conclusion. Please consider these points with me.

MISDIRECTED EXPECTATIONS

How could the nation of Israel have missed the Messiah? He came in fulfillment of the prophecies with all sorts of signs and manifestations. He performed miracles, raised the dead, and was raised from the dead in their very presence. How could they have missed him? The reason: they expected an earthly king over a restoration of David's literal throne (like many Christians do to this day). They were blinded to a spiritual king over a spiritual kingdom. Ron McRay, who has studied these things much more extensively than I, concurs with this point.

Even more amazing, the closest of Jesus' disciples suffered from that same misdirected expectation after his tutoring for over three years. We are astonished that, after he was

raised from the dead and just before his ascension, their last question to him was, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Happily, they and many other Jews did later come to grasp the concept of the spiritual kingdom and they proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom to all the world. But the nation of Israel did not.

In his epistles even until the latter part of his career, Paul dealt with the misunderstanding of disciples who looked for literal fulfillment of spiritual and figurative promises. Still blinded by such materialistic concepts, they would miss the spiritual developments. It is understandable that they might not tell about them in subsequent records for they missed the spiritual in expectation of the physical.

The earthly minded had not seen Jesus coming in the clouds, raising the dead, and gathering souls for judgment. The sun, moon, and stars were still in place. The universe had not dissolved in fervent heat. Believers had not been caught up literally to meet the Lord in the clouds. They had not seen the new heavens and new earth coming down out of heaven. So why would we expect them to give a record of those happenings?

If some discerning disciples did understand the spiritual fulfillment of all the predictions and wrote about them, could we expect that their spiritual explanations would have been grasped any more readily than Paul’s corrective teachings had been? It is not likely that their writings would be recognized and circulated since they did not express their current misguided beliefs.

A GREATER MYSTERY

The destruction of Jerusalem was a literal, historic happening. It was a calamity of the worst sort to the people God had called out, nurtured, taught, corrected, and protected for centuries. In the events surrounding AD 70, their capital and temple, the icons of their nation and religion, were destroyed. Their people were decimated and scattered. Their records were lost. It was the end of Jewish nationalism and it made religious rituals of the Law impossible to keep. These were all visible things that Jews saw happen and they were recorded in much detail by Josephus, a Jew commissioned by the Romans to record the events.

The mystery is: Why did post-AD 70 Christian writers not write at length about this most fateful event in their history? Whether or not they understood the prophecies as literal, they were well aware of these historic happenings that destroyed their nationalism. Why were the church fathers so silent about that calamitous event? From your research you may wish to correct me on this point for I have not researched it.

We do not know the answer, yet we may suggest one. In those early generations there was much persecution of both Jews and Christians. Even though the disciples tried to distance themselves from Jewish nationalism in the eyes of the Romans so as to avoid persecution as Jewish rebels against Rome, they were not always successful. Apostolic epistles taught political correctness toward Rome. So, for post AD 70 disciples to have written about the destruction of their nation by the Romans, it would have put the

Romans in a bad light. That would not only have been politically incorrect, but it could have been bad for their health and longevity!

Those who wrote in the second and third centuries were far removed in time from the events we are discussing. Some lived far from Jerusalem. Some were not Jewish. So those events would not be current topics for them to mention.

CHURCH FATHERS DID CONFIRM!

In spite of all the above, I have saved these power points for the last. Some post AD 70 writers did confirm the fulfillment of all those prophecies. I inquired of another student of preterist eschatology, Greg Rasaka, of nearby Newberg, Oregon (<logos@viafamily.com>). Here is some of his hasty reply to me by email:

“We must remember that even if there are no early church writers who understood Christ's parousia to have occurred in AD70, it does not change what Jesus and the apostles understood and taught. We shouldn't care too much about what men have thought through the centuries.

“The following is taken from John Noe's "Beyond the End Times". He is quoting from Eusebius' "The Proof of the Gospels". I have tried to get my hands on this book, but it is out of print and hard to find. Anyway, he says Eusebius (4th century) "affirmed that Jesus "came" in the fall of Jerusalem and in fulfillment of Zechariah's end-time prophecy".

“Next he quotes from Athanasius, also of the 4th century. He says that Athanasius declared that Christ came again and fulfilled all of Daniel's 70 weeks prophecy. "And Jerusalem is to stand till his coming, and thenceforth, prophets and vision cease in Israel ... And this was why Jerusalem stood till then---namely that there might be exercised in the types as a preparation for the reality...but from that time forth all prophecy is sealed and the city and the temple taken. Why are they so irreligious and so perverse as to see what has happened, and yet to deny Christ, who has brought it all to pass? ...What then has not come to pass, that the Christ must do? What is left unfulfilled, that the Jews should now disbelieve with impunity?" (Athanasius, "On the Incarnation of the Word".)”

So, we are not left without the confirmation of post AD 70 historians! Here are two who confirmed the parousia. Others of you who have read more extensively may be able to point to additional testimony of early writers.

Again, the truth concerning the fulfillment of the words of Jesus and his apostles is not dependent upon the understanding of men or of their records of it. Nor is our salvation dependent upon our correct understanding of these things.

(Cecil Hook, October 2001)