

David W Fletcher, "The Second Coming of Christ—Past or Future?" *Gospel Advocate* (August 6, 1981): 460, 463
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THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST—PAST OR FUTURE?

Did the second coming of Christ occur at the Roman siege of Jerusalem in AD 70? Or is the Lord's second advent yet future? In other words, is the promised return of Christ (see Acts 1:11; Hebrews 9:28) past or future?

The expectation of Christ's second coming is a very important New Testament doctrine. Anthony Hoekema correctly remarks, "Every book of the New Testament points us to the return of Christ and urges us to live in such a way as to be always ready for that return."¹ But intermingled with the certainty of the Lord's reappearance is the uncertainty of the *time* of his coming. This combination of definiteness (concerning the *fact* of his coming) and indefiniteness (concerning the *time* of his coming) makes the believer's watchfulness a strong necessity.

Consider the parables of the Master's return (see Luke 12:36-37, 42-46). In both parables the Master *will* and *does* return. The coming is certain. Similarly, in both cases the slaves and the steward *do not know the time* of the Master's return. The tension brought about by this combination of "knowing what will happen but not knowing when it will happen" provides the incentive to watch and be ready for the Master's return.

The New Testament writers' exhortation to watchfulness in Christian living is rooted in "knowing what but not knowing when." This underlies what could be called the "ambiguity" of language about Christ's second coming. God's inspired penmen urged first-century saints to be

¹Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 109.

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faithful just as if Christ could have come on that day, in their lifetime, or in the near future. Paul writes, "The Lord is at hand" (Philippians 4:5). James tells his readers, "The Judge is standing before the doors" (James 5:9). The writer of Hebrews remarks, "In a very little while the Coming One will come and will not delay" (Hebrews 10:37). Peter asserts, "The end of all things is near" (1 Peter 4:7). The reality of Christ's coming was an all too important possibility to neglect or minimize. But at the same time these men wrote as if Jesus might not come very soon. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that the great apostasy would precede the coming of the Lord (see 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5). James exhorts, "Be patient . . . until the coming of the Lord" (James 5:7). And Peter anticipates a delay and explains, "To the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day" (2 Peter 3:8). The delay of Christ's coming was also a very real possibility.

This "ambiguity" about the *time* of the Lord's return is present in the text because *no one knows when*. Jesus himself states, "Concerning that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matthew 24:36; cf. Mark 13:32). This scripture indicates the inability to know the time of Christ's second coming. Not even the Son of God in his humble, incarnate condition knows. Should the knowledge of the inspired writers, and of later Christian scholars and interpreters, surpass that of the Son of God himself?

From this, we should assume that it is wrong to impose a knowledge of the time of Christ's second coming on any of the New Testament writers. It also is wrong to mistake their fervor of expectancy for the Lord's return for a knowledge of the time of his return. For

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example, Hoekema indicates that Paul’s earnest expectation of Christ’s coming does not mean that he:

Set a “within-this-generation” date for the Parousia. Paul was not interested in date-setting; his great concern was to teach the certainty of Christ’s return and the importance of being always ready for that return. To say that Paul hoped still to be alive at the Parousia is one thing; but to say that he definitely taught that the Parousia would occur before his death is quite another thing!²

The same, I believe, holds true for all the New Testament writers.

To return to the question initially posed, the preterist view³ of Christ’s reappearance seems to violate the “ambiguity” of language based on the “unknown time” factor mentioned above. In striking contrast to the second coming [Greek word *parousia*] of Christ, the coming [Greek word *erchomenon*; see Matthew 24:30] of the Son of Man in judgment on Jerusalem in AD 70 is described in specific language that pinpoints a definite time. In Matthew 24:4-33, Jesus speaks of both the *time* and the *sign* of the destruction of Jerusalem. The ultimate sign indicating the time of the end of Jerusalem is the abomination of desolation (verse 15), that is, the Roman armies surrounding Jerusalem (see Luke 21:20). Jesus continues to define the results brought about by this “sign,” and then he summarizes, “When you see all these things, *you know* that it is near . . . this generation will not pass away until all these things happen” (verses 33-34).

Contrast the certainty of these events with verse 36: “But concerning that day and hour *no one*

²Ibid., 124.

³The preterist view is that prophecies about Christ’s second coming were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans in AD 70. Of course, there are variations of this general belief in preterist circles.

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knows.” The antithesis is plain. Regarding the destruction of Jerusalem, specific signs lead up to a specific and knowable time. Regarding the second coming, the time cannot be known and as a result no signs will or can be given (see verses 37ff.).

So it seems the view that equates the parousia of Jesus with the Roman siege of Jerusalem fails for two reasons. First, it fails by assuming that the New Testament writers had knowledge of the time of Christ’s second coming when Jesus said that they did not. Second, it fails by denying the explicit distinction between knowing and not knowing in the context of Matthew, chapter 24. For the same reasons, any preterist view of Christ’s second advent seems misguided. No one will know the *time* of the Master’s return until it actually happens, and when it happens then all shall know (see Revelation 1:7). The biblical imperative is not to try to figure out the time but rather be ready by “looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).