

The Prophetic Perfect: The implications of Hebrew's lack of a future tense for interpretation of prophecy:

Among my many roles in life, I have been a teacher of Physics, Mathematics, and IT¹ and have always tried to determine where my students go wrong in their attempt to answer a question. If I can be fairly sure about where their thinking goes off-track, then I am able to specifically address this point in their deductive reasoning and hopefully help them correct this mistake and achieve greater success.

I try to use the same principle when analysing people's arguments for theological doctrines that I believe are erroneous. In many cases, I have found with great majority of these mistaken arguments, that the point of divergence and subsequent error, has been some failure to grasp a Hebraic approach, a Hebraism of some sort. It seems to me that two of the most significant are the Hebraic principle of 'agency' and the Hebraic use of hyperbole².

Recently I have been involved in debating Preterism³, and I had also written a chapter addressing this Hellenistic doctrine in my latest book '[Doctrinal Pitfalls of Hellenism](#)'.

Preterism had bothered me in the sense that I could not see why so many, otherwise intelligent and rational students of the Bible, were accepting this doctrine. It wasn't enough that I could see many realities that made the conclusions of Preterism untenable, what troubled me was why these sincere men and women were choosing this doctrine in the first place. What were they reading and interpreting that was so convincing to them.

I believe I now have a much better understanding of where they are coming from, and I have to thank the many Preterists, both 'Partial' and 'Full' that have discussed this doctrine with me and helped me more fully understand their presuppositions and reasons.

So where do I see them going wrong?

Firstly, like most Hellenistic and mainstream Christian students of the Bible, they start in the New Testament. This is a classic mistake. The NT is built on the Tanakh. If we are to accept it's inspiration and veracity, then we must also accept the inspiration, veracity and foundational position of the Tanakh.

Please see my article '[Understanding the Bible 101](#)' at circumcisedheart.info for more detail on this issue.

The obvious problem with using the NT as your starting position, is that it's like trying to build a house with no foundations and making the foundations up as you go along. It encourages not only the creation of a 'Christ' (from the Greek '*Christos*') of your own making, rather than a Messiah (transliterated from the Hebrew משיח - Mashiach), which is a Hebraic concept and entity, and not a Hellenistic/Greek one.

Also it encourages the creation of many doctrines that are simply not Biblical because they often contradict the Tanakh and therefore these interpretations contradict Yeshua himself and his Apostles, who all held the Tanakh (and only the Tanakh) as sacred and authoritative.

The Tanakh can not be contradicted by the New Testament. Expanded, explained, revealed, enriched most surely, but never contradicted.

If we allow contradictions, then the Almighty is subject to change, though He said '*I change not*' (Malachi 3:6), and He is then a liar and no different to Allah, the moon god, the god of Islam!

Thus if there is some text in the NT that contradicts the Tanakh, or at least, our interpretation of it, is contradictory, then we need to, either reassess our interpretation, or identify this text as a corruption (if we agree that the original autographs of the NT were in perfect accord with the Tanakh).

¹ And Biblical Theology as well for many years now.

² I have a number of articles on the Hebraic Mindset at www.circumcisedheart.info

³ See definition's of Preterism and Hellenism at the end of this article

Secondly, having started in the NT, the Preterists then read the prophecies, which are mostly present tense, with some even past tense (or prophetic perfect), and from their perspective of some 2000 years later, they therefore see that the prophecies must have already been fulfilled.

This then leads them to look for events of the first century through which such fulfillment must have come and they end up with the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

So the mistake, the point of divergence, is primarily two-fold. First, starting in the wrong place and secondly, not being aware that Biblical Hebrew, the language of the Bible, the language and mindset of Israel in the first century has no future tense.

Let's now look at this second point in some detail.

It appears that the King James translators of 1611 were not familiar with this problem of the Hebrew language having no easy way of presenting something as 'future tense'. As almost all modern versions are based on the KJV, it is no wonder that the great majority of translations distort the prophetic message of the Coming Age, the Kingdom of God.

The Hebrew language almost always presents events as past or present, even when those events are clearly still to occur and even perhaps predicted to occur a long time into the future. This is strikingly clear and unequivocal when these 'events' are divinely inspired prophetic utterances.

Add to this the fact that, as Hebrew is such an 'action language', **the writer would always translate himself to the time of the event he was describing** as if he were there and it was occurring as he/she witnessed it⁴.

This was true for events that were long past, such as Moses descriptions of the Creation, and events that were still future.

Thus great care was sometimes needed to determine if the literal, present tense description of an event meant that it was either:

1. occurring at the time the writer spoke about it (or in the very recent past to their making a record of it); or
2. that it had occurred some day, years or generations in the past, or was to occur even some days, years or thousands of years in the future.

Part of the reason for using 'past' or 'present' tense for prophecies was the understanding of the Prophet of God, that the event was as good as accomplished, if it was a promise of the Almighty.

The writer could speak of it as past, because it's future occurrence was just as certain.

This mode of speaking is very common. It can be seen very clearly when we consider the Creation accounts, where the 'fiats' of God are declared as if presently being completed, and then actually take a considerable time to complete, even to the point where the order of completion may be different to the order of the 'fiat' or proclamation.

For some details on this please see my blog posts: "the Hebraic Mindset and The Fiats of God" -

<http://globaltruthinternational.com/2012/10/11/the-hebraic-mindset-and-the-fiats-of-god/>

and 'The Fiats of God: Genesis Re-punctuated' - <http://globaltruthinternational.com/2012/10/12/the-fiats-of-god-genesis-re-punctuated/>

Here is some examples of 'prophetic perfect' in the Isaiah:

Isaiah 5:13 *"Therefore my people have gone into captivity, Because they have no knowledge; Their honorable men*

⁴ "[The past tense is used instead of the future tense] when the speaker views the action as being as good as done. This is very common in the Divine prophetic utterances where, though the sense is literally future, it is regarded and spoken of as though it were already accomplished in the Divine purpose and determination. The figure is to show the absolute certainty of the things spoken of." - Bullinger, 'Figures of Speech', p518

are famished, And their multitude dried up with thirst." - written before the exile.

Isaiah 9:2 *"The people living in darkness have seen a great light; upon those living in the land that lies in the shadow of death, light has dawned."* - written a long time before the event most Christians would argue this refers to.

Isaiah 11:9 *"Evil they do not, nor destroy in all My holy mountain, For full hath been the earth with the knowledge of YHVH, As the waters are covering the sea."* – this prophecy is clearly still to be fulfilled.

Here also is a little of how Robert Young, the translator for Young's Literal Translation (1862) explains it: *"In referring to events which might be either past or future, (the Hebrew authors) were accustomed to act on the principle of transferring themselves mentally to the period and place of the events themselves, and were not content with coldly viewing them as those of a bygone or still coming time; hence the very frequent use of the present tense..."*

- 1) *It would appear that the Hebrew writers, when narrating or describing events which might be either past or future (such as the case of Moses in reference to the Creation or the Deluge, on the one hand, and to the Coming of the Messiah or the Calamities which were to befall Israel, on the other), uniformly wrote as if they were alive at the time of the occurrence of the events mentioned, and as eye-witnesses of what they are narrating.*

This principle of translation has long been admitted by the best Biblical Expositors in reference to the Prophetic Delineation of Gospel times, but it is equally applicable and necessary to the historical narratives of Genesis, Ruth, etc.

- 2) *The Hebrew writers often express the certainty of a thing taking place by putting it in the past tense, though the actual fulfillment may not take place for ages. This is easily understood and appreciated when the language is used by Yahweh, as when He says! in Gen. 15:18, "Unto thy seed I have given this land;" and in 17:4, "I, lo, My covenant is with thee, and thou hast become a father of a multitude of nations." The same thing is found in Gen. 23:11, where Ephron answers Abraham: "Nay, my lord, hear me; the field I have given to thee, and the cave that is in it; to thee I have given it; before the eyes of the sons of my people I have given it to thee; bury thy dead."*

And again in Abraham's answer to Ephron: "Only—if thou wouldst hear me—I have given the money of the field; accept from me, and I bury my dead there." Again in 2 Kings 5:6, the King of Syria, writing to the King of Israel, says: "Lo, I have sent unto thee Naaman, my servant, and thou hast recovered him from his leprosy,"—considering the King of Israel as his servant, a mere expression of the master's purpose is sufficient. In Judges 8:19, Gideon says to Zebah and Zalmunnah, "If ye had kept them alive, I had not slain you." So in Deut.31:18, "For all the evils that they have done"—shall have done. It would be easy to multiply examples, but the above may suffice for the present.

... The Hebrew has only two tenses, which, for want of better terms, may be called Past and Present.

The past tenses is either perfect or imperfect, e. g., 'I lived in this house five years,' or 'I have lived in this house five years; this distinction may and can only be known by the context, which must in all cases be viewed from the writer's standing-point. In every other instance of its occurrence, it points out either:

A gentle imperative, e. g., "Lo, I have sent unto thee Nauman my servant, and thou hast recovered him from his leprosy;" see also Zeck. 1. 3, etc. or

A fixed determination that a certain thing shall be done, e. g., "Nay, my lord, hear me, the field I have given to thee, and the cave that is in it; to thee I have given it; before the eyes of the sons of my people I have given it to thee; bury thy dead;" and in the answer, "Only—if thou wouldst hear me—I have given the money of the field."

Thus, in the Hebrew language, Joel 2:28-32 reads as follows (Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible with the correct tenses of the verbs):

"And it hath come to pass afterwards, I do pour out My spirit on all flesh, And prophesied have your sons and your daughters, Your old men do dream dreams, Your young men do see visions. And also on the men-servants, and on

the maid-servants, In those days I do pour out My Spirit. And I have given wonders in the heavens, and in the earth, Blood and fire, and columns of smoke. The sun is turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, Before the coming of the day of Jehovah, The great and the fearful. And it hath come to pass, Every one who calleth in the name of Jehovah is delivered, For in mount Zion and in Jerusalem there is an escape, As Jehovah hath said, And among the remnants whom Jehovah is calling!" – from http://www.teleiosministries.com/pdfs/Research_Material/hebrew_has_no_future_tense.pdf

Interestingly, Robert Young did not use the same approach when he quoted the Apostle Peter (Acts 2) quoting Joel 2.

While, it seems very clear that when Joel first made this prophecy, it had not occurred even though he referred to these events in the present tense. It is also very clear that when the Apostle Peter quoted Joel, he would also have been speaking in the present tense, and that some of these events were in fact happening at the very instance in time.

Where we need to take great care though is in determining if ALL the events of this prophecy were occurring at that exact time.

For example, there is no historical evidence that the sun turned dark on that Shavuot (Pentecost) day, or that the moon was the colour of blood. There is also no clear evidence that this part of the prophecy was figurative, while the rest was literal. What seems much more likely is that the Apostle Peter saw that some of Joel's prophecy was being fulfilled at the time, and that the Apostle Peter therefore anticipated that the rest would be fulfilled at some later time.

Partly because English does not have this problem with the lack of a future tense, and because the translators were not Hebrew prophets accustomed to using this 'fiat' language (where declaring a prophecy was to speak of something so certain to occur, that it may as well be a past event), most translators have not translated literally, but tried to reflect the reality as they understood it. Yet, they have not done this entirely consistently, so now apparent contradictions appear.

Let me give a couple of examples that I think, illustrate the problem, and also offer something of a solution.

Look at Jude 14 -15. The NASB has *"It was also about these men that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, "Behold, the Lord **came** with many thousands of His holy ones, **15** to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him."*

While a number of translators change the tense here, Jude is referring to a prophetic statement in the Book of Enoch (a first century BCE manuscript written in Hebrew), which speaks as if the coming vision of the Messiah's judgment, with a great many of the faithful had already occurred.

The author of the Book of Enoch had used this 'past tense' or 'prophetic perfect'⁵ Hebraism to speak of a future event that he was so sure would one day occur. Jude, the brother of Yeshua and also a Hebrew and Israelite had quoted him and repeated this use. In translation into Greek, this 'prophetic perfect' had been maintained, and mostly even maintained in English (perhaps because the translators were translating a quote, rather than the words of the NT author).

I would expect that the great majority, even of Preterists, would read Jude and accept that the Book of Enoch's prophecy of Godly judgment, where a great many of the faithful are witnesses had not yet occurred when this prophecy was recorded. Neither had it occurred when Jude wrote. I would also argue from known historical information that it did not occur in 70 CE either, but here I might expect some disagreement from Preterists.

Also consider Ephesians 2:6-7 *"6 That is, God raised us up with the Messiah Yeshua and **seated** us with him in heaven, 7 in order to exhibit in the ages to come how infinitely rich is his grace, how great is his kindness toward us who are united with the Messiah Yeshua."* – CJB

⁵ Also called 'perfect tense' by some scholars.

Here, the translators generally have maintained the past tense in using the word 'seated', even though we know (I would hope!) that we are not currently in heaven, while at the same time believing that Yeshua is.

"That God has already seated his people with Christ in the heavenly realm is an idea unparalleled elsewhere in the Pauline corpus. It can best be understood as a statement of God's purpose for his people—a purpose which is so sure of fulfillment that it can be spoken of as having already taken place." - F. F. Bruce, 'The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians' p 287.

Now look instead at Colossians 3:1 *"So if you were raised along with the Messiah, then seek the things above, where the Messiah is sitting at the right hand of God."* - CJB

Here, heaven, the dwelling place of the Messiah is now 'above'. That is, the Apostle Paul is now telling us that we are really on earth, not 'seated' in heaven. Both statements can't literally be true. Clearly, Ephesians 2:6 then is making use of this 'prophetic perfect' Hebraism.

While it can be very difficult when reading the NT in the English language to see where the 'prophetic perfect' is in use (especially since this Hebraism has been almost totally hidden by the use of future tense in English), some help is found in that these verses are often coupled with a second or third verse which clearly sets the context as one of future fulfillment. Some discernment and care is still needed though, as even Young's Literal Translation does not appear to be consistent in its approach either.

In fact, the prophetic perfect is perhaps most cleverly and unsuspectedly hidden in passages which deal with salvation, redemption, adoption, and glorification. All these concepts are primarily future, as they address our future citizenship of the Coming Age and ultimately, the New Universe. And yet, there is a sense in which they all apply now.

All who are faithful are 'saved', and yet that salvation is a divine promise, not a currently existing reality in which the believer is free from all pain and evil, and from temptation to sin, etc. If we hold to the blessed assurance of our 'hope' then it may even seem to us as if this salvation is present now, but a clear-headed and sober assessment of the world we live in today should surely make it clear that the earth is not as 'full of the knowledge of YHVH' as 'the sea covers the earth'.

And yet, it seems to me, that because many Preterists have approached the prophecies in the NT in this incorrect manner I have already alluded to, and been unaware of the Hebraism of the 'prophetic perfect', they have indeed embraced the belief that the earth is now as 'full of the knowledge of YHVH' as 'the sea covers the earth'. That is, they actually believe that the Messiah has actually returned and that we are now in the Coming Age.

It must surely be very difficult for those who have been so led astray into believing such a clear falsehood; to now turn back and re-assess their position. In the same way that Isaiah prophesied that times would come when people would call evil good, and good evil (Isaiah 5:20), these Preterists have managed to strongly delude themselves, though it would seem that they have done this most honestly and sincerely.

But there is always hope. The Almighty is always willing to help us, if we decide to further circumcise our hearts; to open our hearts, our emotional attachments and our logical faculties, and look again with re-newed, Hebraic eyes.

I believe when Preterists are prepared to suspend their judgment a little and revisit their understanding from the perspective that I outline in my 'Understanding the Bible 101' article, there is a fair chance that they may be enlightened, and recognize the serious error that Preterism is, as well as the very unhelpful implications that this doctrine develops.

I give some details on the negative implications in my article ['Preterism: Not Even on Judaism's Radar'](#).

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Definitions:

Hellenism:

While Hellenism essentially means Greek culture and philosophical approach, it means much more as well, because it stands in sharp contrast to the Hebraic mindset and approach.

In terms of Hellenism's impact on Judaism and Christianity, the seeds were sown with the arrival of Alexander the Great in Israel around 332 BCE. From this moment Hellenism began to impact and significantly influence many of the Jewish people, not only in the Diaspora but also in the Land of Israel.

By the time of Yeshua, the 'Hellenists' (Jewish people who followed Greek customs) were common. In fact, this section of the Jewish community is mentioned in Acts (see both Chapters 2 & 6) where we find that the Apostle Stephen is put in charge of caring for those Hellenists who had accepted the Messiahship of Yeshua and joined the community of believers.

The evidence is strong that the cultural background of this Hellenists meant that they have a much lower affinity and loyalty to the Land of Israel in any Biblical sense. For them, any argument that they need not be fully compliant with the Temple customs and other rites of the religion of Israel, was likely to have a more sympathetic hearing.

Hellenism also over time introduced the allegorical approach (made famous by Augustine) to the study and interpretation of Scripture.

Hellenism had Pythagorean and Platonic philosophies at its core, but it also embraced some Egyptian and Persian cults which included the practice of asceticism. Asceticism is not a Biblical, Torah based approach, even though the Essenes practiced it to some degree.

Hellenism rejected and replaced many of the Torah practices of Israel and so with the overthrow of the Hellenistic tyrant, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and the miracle of the Temple oil, the festival of Hanukah become and remains, a symbol of the rejection of Hellenism. Yeshua celebrated this festival (John 10:22-23).

The core message and truth of the Bible is a Hebraic truth NOT a Greek/Hellenistic approach to living.

Preterism:

While Wikipedia is not exactly a scholarly source, having looked at a few of the main Preterist websites, I don't see any major disagreement between their definitions and wikipedias:

"Preterism is a Christian eschatological view that interprets prophecies of the Bible as events which have already happened. Daniel is interpreted as events that happened in the second century BC while Revelation is interpreted as events that happened in the first century AD.

Preterism holds that Ancient Israel finds its continuation or fulfillment in the Christian church at the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70...

Partial Preterism:

Partial preterism holds that most eschatological prophecies, such as the destruction of Jerusalem, the Antichrists, the Great Tribulation, and the advent of the Day of the Lord as a "judgment-coming" of Christ, were fulfilled either in AD 70 or during the persecution of Christians under the Emperor Nero. The Second coming and the resurrection of the dead, however, have not yet occurred in the partial preterist system....

Full Preterism:

Full preterism differs from partial preterism in that full preterists believe that all eschatology or "end times" events were fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem, including the resurrection of the dead and Jesus' Second Coming, or Parousia, and the Final Judgment. ..." - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preterism>