

Preterism as a Non-Falsifiable Eschatological System: A Semantic and Epistemic Analysis

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Abstract

This paper evaluates preterism not merely as a competing eschatological chronology but as a comprehensive interpretive system governed by prior epistemic and logical commitments. Rather than revisiting exegetical disputes over A.D. 70, it advances a system-level critique centered on falsifiability and prophetic verification. The study argues that biblical fulfillment presupposes public, historically referential correspondence between promise and event.

It identifies a controlling false dilemma in preterist reasoning, namely, that exhaustive first-century fulfillment is the only alternative to prophetic failure. Once assumed, this dilemma redirects interpretive pressure away from historical correspondence toward systematic redefinition. Through a formal taxonomy of semantic, ontological, epistemic, temporal, scope, identity, causal, and functional redefinitions, the paper shows how preterism preserves fulfillment claims by continually adjusting the meaning, referent, or verification criteria of eschatological language.

Three case studies, resurrection, Parousia, and substantial fulfillment, demonstrate that these redefinitions are coordinated mechanisms applied consistently across doctrinal loci. The cumulative result is an eschatological model that remains internally coherent while insulated from disconfirmation. The article concludes that preterism functions as a non-falsifiable eschatological system, thereby undermining the epistemic integrity of fulfillment as a category of biblical theology.

Keywords: preterism; eschatology; fulfillment; falsifiability; hermeneutics; resurrection; parousia; apocalyptic interpretation

1. Introduction

Preterism is commonly presented as an eschatological position distinguished primarily by its chronological claims, namely, that the major eschatological prophecies of the New Testament were fulfilled in the first century, most decisively in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Scholarly discussion therefore tends to focus on questions of dating, historical correlation, and the symbolic character of apocalyptic language. While these issues are not insignificant, such approaches often obscure a more fundamental question: how does preterism function as an interpretive system?

This article contends that the defining features of preterism are not exhausted by its proposed timeline of fulfillment. Rather, preterism is best understood as a system-level hermeneutical framework governed by prior logical and epistemic commitments. These commitments shape how texts are read, what qualifies as fulfillment, and which criteria are permitted to function as disconfirming evidence. As a result, interpretive pressure is redirected away from historical correspondence and toward the reconfiguration of meaning itself.

At the center of this framework lies a controlling concern for prophetic credibility, frequently expressed through appeals to New Testament time-texts such as “soon,” “near,” and “this generation.” These expressions are commonly treated as requiring exhaustive fulfillment within the lifetime of the original audience. Once this requirement is assumed, elements of prophecy that resist first-century realization are not allowed to challenge the fulfillment thesis. Instead, their semantic, ontological, or referential content is adjusted so that non-correspondence no longer counts against fulfillment.

The present study does not attempt to resolve every exegetical dispute associated with preterism, nor does it deny the legitimate use of symbolism or typology in biblical interpretation. Its purpose is more foundational: to examine whether preterism preserves the biblical concept of prophetic fulfillment as a historically verifiable correspondence between a promise and its fulfillment. To that end, the article analyzes preterism through three integrated lenses: a logical analysis of its governing assumptions, a semantic and ontological analysis of its interpretive redefinitions, and an epistemic analysis of how those redefinitions function in practice.

The thesis advanced is that preterism constitutes a non-falsifiable eschatological system. By redefining fulfillment itself, along with terms such as coming, seeing, resurrection, judgment, and world, the system systematically removes the conditions under which its fulfillment claims could be shown to be false. While this strategy is motivated by a desire to safeguard the reliability of Jesus’ and the apostles’ prophetic statements, it does so at the cost of evacuating the criteria by which prophecy has traditionally been understood to be meaningful, testable, and coherent.

The argument proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes the epistemic necessity of falsifiability for historically referential claims and situates prophetic fulfillment within that framework. Section 3 identifies the false dilemma concerning prophetic credibility that functions as the system’s logical driver. Section 4 presents a formal taxonomy of the redefinitions operative within preterist interpretation. Sections 5–7 examine representative case studies of resurrection, Parousia, and substantial fulfillment to demonstrate how these redefinitions function in practice. Section 8 draws together the findings and reflects on their implications for eschatological interpretation more broadly.

2. Falsifiability and the Verification of Prophetic Claims

Any claim that purports to describe historical fulfillment implicitly invites evaluation by criteria capable of confirming or disconfirming that claim. This is not a concession to modern scientism, but a basic epistemic principle: assertions about events in history must, at least in principle, be accountable to publicly accessible evidence. Where no conceivable state of affairs could count against a claim, that claim ceases to function as a historical assertion and instead operates as a closed interpretive construct.

In the philosophy of knowledge, this concern is often framed in terms of *falsifiability*, the condition under which a proposition is open to refutation by contrary evidence. While most closely associated with the philosophy of science, the principle is not domain-specific. Historical inquiry, legal reasoning, and textual interpretation alike presuppose a distinction between what would count as confirmation and what would count as failure. Without such a distinction, truth-claims lose determinate content.

Biblical prophecy, as presented within Scripture itself, assumes this kind of accountability precisely. Prophetic declarations are repeatedly framed as verifiable acts of divine speech, distinguished from false prophecy by their correspondence with subsequent events (e.g., Deut. 18:21–22; Isa. 41:21–24; 42:8–9). Fulfillment, in this biblical sense, is not a private or purely theological judgment but a public category: what God promises is expected to occur in a manner recognizable as the realization of what was promised. The intelligibility of fulfillment, therefore, presupposes that non-fulfillment remains a meaningful possibility.

This requirement does not entail naïve literalism or the denial of symbolic and apocalyptic language. Symbols, metaphors, and visions may mediate prophetic revelation, but they do not abolish the expectation that prophecy terminates in historically referential outcomes. Symbolic description and historical verification are not mutually exclusive. Biblical symbolism consistently depicts realities rather than replacing them. A prophecy communicated through imagery still refers to events, states of affairs, or divine actions that either occur or do not occur in history.

The relevance of falsifiability to eschatological interpretation, then, lies not in imposing extraneous standards upon the text, but in preserving the meaningfulness of prophetic claims themselves. If fulfillment can be affirmed irrespective of historical correspondence, if the absence of anticipated events merely prompts semantic or ontological adjustment rather than reconsideration, then the distinction between fulfillment and reinterpretation collapses. Under such conditions, no conceivable evidence could disconfirm the claim, and fulfillment is deprived of epistemic content.

It is at this point that the present critique intersects with preterist eschatology. The argument advanced here is not that preterist interpretations err because they employ symbolism or typology, but that the system as a whole neutralizes the very conditions under which its fulfillment claims could be shown false. By redefining the nature of

prophetic referents such as coming, seeing, resurrection, judgment, and world in ways that detach them from ordinary historical expectations, preterism preserves its first-century fulfillment thesis at the cost of rendering that thesis non-falsifiable. What is ultimately at stake is not merely the timing of eschatological events, but the epistemic integrity of prophetic fulfillment as a category of biblical theology.

3. The False Dilemma Driving Preterism

A defining feature of preterist eschatology is the presence of a controlling logical assumption that precedes and governs exegetical decisions. This assumption poses a dilemma regarding prophetic credibility: either New Testament eschatological prophecy was entirely fulfilled in the first century, or Jesus and the apostolic witnesses were mistaken in their expectations. Although seldom articulated formally, this dilemma functions implicitly as the system's primary constraint.

Representative preterist arguments consistently operate within this frame. If the parousia, resurrection, or judgment did not occur within the lifetime of the original audience, prophetic credibility is said to be compromised. On this reading, New Testament time-texts are treated not as exhortative or pastoral language, but as rigid chronological delimiters. Once accepted, this premise exerts decisive pressure on interpretation.

What renders the dilemma false is not its rhetorical force but its artificial restriction of interpretive possibilities. It assumes that exhaustive first-century realization and prophetic failure exhaust the available options. Excluded from consideration are biblically attested patterns such as inaugurated fulfillment without consummation, prophetic telescoping, covenantal inauguration followed by historical interval, conditional delay, and imminence language oriented toward ethical vigilance rather than chronological precision.

The dilemma, therefore, does not arise from the text itself but from a prior epistemic anxiety regarding prophetic reliability. Scripture itself repeatedly records authentic prophetic expectation alongside delayed or staged fulfillment without any implication of error. The insistence that nearness language must entail chronological exhaustion imports a constraint foreign to the biblical presentation of prophecy.

Once this false dilemma is assumed, interpretive flexibility is redirected away from chronology and toward meaning. When historical correspondence proves insufficient—when resurrection does not reverse death, judgment does not culminate history, or the Son of Man does not appear visibly, the system does not reconsider its fulfillment thesis. Instead, it revises the semantic, ontological, or referential content of the prophecy so that non-correspondence no longer counts as disconfirming evidence.

In this way, the false dilemma functions as the logical bridge between the epistemic concerns outlined in Section 2 and the systematic redefinitions catalogued in Section 4. The pressure to avoid prophetic failure does not generate historical reassessment but necessitates conceptual reconfiguration. The result is an interpretive system that

preserves internal coherence precisely by eliminating the conditions under which its central claims could be falsified.

4. Systematic Redefinition as an Interpretive Strategy

Analytical Note on Method and Notation. To make explicit the internal coherence of the interpretive moves examined in this study, the various redefinitions operative within preterist eschatology are identified by analytic reference markers (R1, R2, etc.). These designations do not suggest that preterist authors self-consciously articulate their method in these terms, nor do they correspond to discrete quotations. Instead, they function as heuristic labels that isolate recurring interpretive operations and enable their consistent tracing across doctrinal loci. Subsequent case studies explicitly reference these markers to demonstrate that the same redefinitions recur across resurrection, parousia, and fulfillment discourse, thereby revealing a unified system rather than a series of ad hoc exegetical decisions.

Once the false dilemma identified in the previous section is accepted, preterist interpretation faces a structural problem: numerous elements of New Testament eschatology resist straightforward correspondence with first-century historical events. Rather than allowing this resistance to challenge the fulfillment thesis itself, the system resolves the tension through a consistent maneuver of systematic redefinition. This strategy does not operate at the level of isolated prooftexts, but across the semantic, ontological, epistemic, temporal, and referential domains of prophetic language.

Systematic redefinition may be defined as the coordinated reassignment of meaning, referent, ontological status, or verification criteria of prophetic language to preserve a predetermined fulfillment claim. This is not equivalent to the recognition of metaphor, symbolism, or typology, all of which are native to biblical revelation. Instead, it is a pattern in which the ordinary historical expectations generated by prophetic language are displaced in advance so that the absence of expected events no longer constitutes potential disconfirmation.

For clarity, the redefinitions operative within preterist eschatology may be grouped into several interrelated categories. What follows is a representative taxonomy sufficient to demonstrate the system's internal logic and epistemic effect.

Category I — Semantic Redefinitions (Word-Level)

Semantic redefinitions alter the lexical meaning of key eschatological terms.

R1 — Coming ≠ Personal Arrival. The verb *erchomai* is redefined to denote covenantal judgment or historical action rather than personal presence or arrival (Rev. 1:7; Matt. 24:30; Rev. 22:7), removing the requirement of visibility, embodiment, or location for Christ's coming.

R2 — Seeing ≠ Visual Perception. References to “seeing” the Son of Man are reinterpreted as intellectual realization or retrospective recognition rather than literal sight (Rev. 1:7; Matt. 24:30), allowing fulfillment without any observable event.

R3 — Universal Quantifiers as Hyperbole. Terms such as “all,” “every,” “world,” and “whole earth” are treated as rhetorical exaggerations unless context explicitly forces universality (Rev. 13:7; Rev. 16:14; Matt. 24:14), permitting local events to satisfy global language.

Category II — Ontological Redefinitions (Reality-Level)

Ontological redefinitions alter what kind of reality the prophecy is said to describe.

R4 — Judgment ≠ Final Judgment. Judgment language is reinterpreted as a historical catastrophe rather than as final divine adjudication (Rev. 20:11–15; Matt. 25:31–46), thereby removing eschatological finality and closure.

R5 — Resurrection ≠ Bodily Resurrection. Resurrection is redefined as a corporate covenantal transition or a spiritual status change (Rev. 20:4–6; 1 Cor. 15:52), allowing for fulfillment without bodies rising or death being reversed.

R6 — Kingdom ≠ Manifested Reign. The kingdom of God is redefined as an invisible authority structure rather than a manifested earthly reign (Rev. 11:15; Rev. 20:4), eliminating the need for geopolitical or material transformation.

Category III — Epistemic Redefinitions (Verification-Level)

Epistemic redefinitions alter how fulfillment is recognized or tested.

R7 — Fulfillment ≠ Correspondence. Fulfillment is redefined as thematic resemblance rather than correspondence between promise and event (Deut. 18:21–22; Josh. 21:43–45), rendering fulfillment non-falsifiable.

R8 — Symbol ≠ Symbol-with-Referent. Symbols are treated as metaphors without concrete historical referents (Rev. 13; Rev. 17), preventing disconfirmation by detaching imagery from reality.

Category IV — Temporal Redefinitions (Time & Sequence)

Temporal redefinitions alter how time statements and narrative order function.

R9 — Nearness = Exhaustion. Terms such as “soon” and “near” are taken to require complete fulfillment within the first century (Rev. 1:1; Rev. 22:6–7), forcing an a priori historical terminus.

R10 — Sequence ≠ Chronology. Narrative order is treated as thematic or cyclical rather than chronological (Rev. 6–20), allowing events to be rearranged to fit A.D. 70.

Category V — Scope Redefinitions (Scale & Reach)

Scope redefinitions restrict the extent of prophetic language.

R11 — Earth = Land by Default. The term *gē* (“earth”) is assumed to mean the land of Israel unless proven otherwise (Rev. 13:7; Rev. 16:14), domesticating global judgments into local events.

Category VI — Identity Redefinitions (Referent Instability)

Identity redefinitions allow prophetic symbols to shift referents fluidly.

R12 — Instrument and Object Collapse. The same entity may function as both God’s instrument of judgment and the object being judged (Rev. 17:16–17), absorbing contradictions without resolution.

R13 — Reigning ≠ Political Sovereignty. Reigning “over the kings of the earth” is interpreted as covenantal influence rather than actual rulership (Rev. 17:18).

R14 — Economic Description ≠ Economic Reality. Detailed trade and shipping language is treated as symbolic rather than descriptive (Rev. 18:11–19), allowing landlocked Jerusalem to fulfill maritime descriptions.

R15 — Geographic Constraints Are Theologically Irrelevant. Physical geography need not correspond to geographic imagery (Rev. 18:17–19).

R16 — City Identity Is Elastic. “City” may refer interchangeably to a literal city, a people, a covenant, or a system (Rev. 17–18), preventing collapse when one identification fails.

R17 — Historical Guilt Overrides Context. Past covenantal guilt is allowed to define present prophetic identity irrespective of contemporary actors (Rev. 18:24; Matt. 23:35).

Category VII — Causal Redefinitions (Agency & Responsibility)

R18 — Judgment Without the Judge Appearing. Divine judgment may be fulfilled through historical processes without personal divine action (Rev. 19:11–21), eliminating the need for Christ’s appearing.

Category VIII — Functional Redefinitions (Fulfillment Thresholds)

R19 — Partial Resemblance Equals Fulfillment. Partial or symbolic overlap is sufficient for fulfillment even if major elements remain unrealized (Rev. 20–22).

R20 — Identity Oscillation Without Constraint. The Beast may alternately denote Nero personally, the Roman Empire, a line of emperors, or an abstract system (Rev. 13; Rev. 17).

R21 — Chronological Precision Is Optional. Time periods need not align precisely with historical timelines (Rev. 13:5–7), allowing Nero’s death (A.D. 68) to coexist with events continuing to A.D. 70.

R22 — Worship ≠ Cultic Worship. Worship of the Beast is redefined as political allegiance or civic participation (Rev. 13:4, 8).

R23 — Signs ≠ Supernatural Signs. Miraculous signs are reinterpreted as propaganda, spectacle, or rumor (Rev. 13:13–15).

R24 — Death and Revival ≠ Literal Death and Revival. Mortal wounds and healings are explained via political upheaval or mythic expectation (Rev. 13:3).

R25 — Authority ≠ Comprehensive Control. The Beast's authority is treated as sporadic or regional rather than comprehensive (Rev. 13:7).

R26 — Inspired Interpretation Override. An inspired metaphorical explanation in one passage (e.g., Ezek. 37) is used to control or nullify the literal force of resurrection or eschatological language in unrelated texts lacking such inspired constraints.

Taken together, these redefinitions form an integrated interpretive network. They do not merely reinterpret complex texts but redefine, in advance, what would count as failure. With this taxonomy in place, the subsequent case studies can be read not as isolated disagreements but as concrete applications of a consistent system-level strategy.

5. Case Study I: Resurrection

Few doctrines more clearly expose the dynamics of systematic redefinition than the doctrine of the resurrection. Across the Old and New Testaments, resurrection language denotes the reversal of death, the restoration of embodied life following physical demise. This expectation emerges not from isolated prooftexts but from a broad canonical pattern in which resurrection functions as a concrete, historically referential act of divine power.

Second Temple Jewish literature overwhelmingly reflects this understanding. Resurrection hope is expressed in terms of bodies raised, graves opened, and the dead restored to life (e.g., Dan. 12:2; Isa. 26:19; Ezek. 37). While imagery and metaphor are present, they presuppose rather than negate bodily restoration. The New Testament inherits and intensifies this expectation, grounding Christian hope in the bodily resurrection of Jesus as both prototype and guarantee of the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor. 15:12–23).

Preterist interpretation departs from this framework not by denying resurrection, but by redefining its semantic and ontological content. Resurrection is reconceived as a corporate or covenantal transition rather than the reanimation of deceased bodies (R5). On this view, resurrection language signifies the vindication of the new covenant community, and the passing away of the old covenant order, consummated in the events surrounding A.D. 70. Death and life are redescribed as covenantal states rather than biological conditions.

Independent lexical or contextual constraints within resurrection texts do not drive this redefinition. It is necessitated by the absence of any historically verifiable, bodily resurrection event in the first century corresponding to the scope and universality of New

Testament promises. Confronted with this absence, the system resolves the tension by altering what resurrection is taken to mean, often invoking inspired metaphorical explanations elsewhere (e.g., Ezek. 37) as a controlling hermeneutical solvent for unrelated eschatological passages (R26).

Ontologically, resurrection is relocated from the domain of public history to that of covenantal status (R5). Instead of an event occurring to the dead, resurrection becomes a change occurring for the living community. This shift removes resurrection from empirical scrutiny: no empty tombs, transformed bodies, or raised dead are required, because fulfillment is said to consist in invisible spiritual realities rather than observable events.

The epistemic consequences are decisive. Once resurrection is defined in non-bodily, non-historical terms, no conceivable historical evidence can count against the fulfillment claim. The persistence of death, graves, and bodily decay ceases to be relevant data because fulfillment has been redefined away from correspondence (R7).

This move also generates internal tensions within the New Testament witness. The apostolic proclamation of Jesus' resurrection is presented as evidential precisely because it was bodily, physical, and publicly attested (Acts 2:31–32; 3:15; 1 Cor. 15:3–8). Paul explicitly ties the credibility of Christian faith to the defeat of death, insisting that a non-bodily resurrection empties the gospel of its content (1 Cor. 15). To reinterpret resurrection as covenantal transition, therefore, introduces a discontinuity between Christ's resurrection and that of believers, a discontinuity the New Testament itself resists.

In sum, the preterist treatment of the resurrection exemplifies systematic redefinition at its clearest. The historical absence of bodily resurrection is not taken as evidence against fulfillment; it becomes the catalyst for redefining resurrection so that absence no longer matters. The doctrine is preserved linguistically, while its historical substance is replaced with an abstract equivalent. Resurrection remains affirmed, but only at the cost of rendering it non-falsifiable.

This pattern will recur in subsequent analyses. When eschatological promises generate expectations that exceed first-century historical realities, the system does not reconsider its thesis of fulfillment; it revises the ontology and verification criteria of the promise (R5, R7). The following section examines how the same strategy operates in preterist interpretations of the parousia.

6. Case Study II: Parousia

The doctrine of the parousia presents an even more acute test of systematic redefinition, because the New Testament consistently portrays the coming of the Son of Man as a public, visible, and climactic event embedded within history. Unlike resurrection language, which occasionally employs metaphor, parousia terminology is explicitly tied to arrival, manifestation, and perception. The cumulative force of this language generates expectations that resist reduction to purely covenantal or invisible processes.

In the Synoptic Gospels, the parousia is associated with observable phenomena: cosmic disturbance, angelic activity, the gathering of the elect, and the explicit declaration that “they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27). The emphasis on seeing is not incidental. It functions to distinguish the parousia from ordinary providential judgments and to anchor it in shared human perception (R1, R2). The apostolic writings reinforce this expectation, presenting the parousia as the moment when Christ is revealed, appears, and is manifested openly (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:16–17; 2 Thess. 1:7–10; Rev. 1:7).

Preterist interpretation resolves the tension between these expectations and first-century history through a coordinated shift in semantic and ontological meaning. The parousia is redefined not as a literal arrival or personal manifestation of Christ, but as a metaphor for the exercise of divine authority in judgment (R1). Drawing upon Old Testament theophanic imagery in which Yahweh is said to “come” against nations, preterist readings collapse parousia language into covenantal vindication and judicial action culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

This appeal to prophetic imagery is not without precedent; Scripture employs metaphorical language of coming for divine judgment. Within preterist interpretation, however, this category is expanded to absorb the entirety of parousia expectation. Texts that describe visibility, universality, and finality are subsumed under a single metaphorical framework, eliminating any qualitative distinction between routine historical judgments and the climactic coming anticipated by the New Testament (R3, R19).

Ontologically, the parousia is relocated from the realm of observable history to that of invisible authority and retrospective recognition (R18). Christ is said to have “come” not by appearing, but by reigning; not by being seen, but by being acknowledged through historical consequences. As with the redefinition of resurrection, this move removes the parousia from empirical verification. The absence of any first-century event involving the visible manifestation of Christ ceases to be problematic because visibility itself is redefined (R2).

This shift generates a cascade of interpretive consequences. Passages that contrast the future parousia with prior judgments lose their force; exhortations grounded in anticipation of Christ’s appearing are reduced to warnings about imminent catastrophe; and declarations of universal visibility are localized by treating universal quantifiers as hyperbolic or geographically restricted (R3, R11). The cumulative effect is a narrowing of scope and a flattening of eschatological distinction.

Epistemically, the parousia becomes immune to disconfirmation. No absence of appearance, no continuation of history, and no lack of universal recognition can count against the fulfillment claim, because the criteria for fulfillment have been redefined in advance (R7). What would ordinarily function as evidence against fulfillment becomes irrelevant once coming, seeing, and universality are systematically reinterpreted.

As with the resurrection, the Parousia is preserved linguistically but emptied of its historical substance. The doctrine remains affirmed, but only by transforming the nature of what it affirms. The result is a fulfillment claim that cannot fail, not because it has been historically realized, but because it has been conceptually insulated.

This analysis further confirms that systematic redefinition is not an ad hoc response to isolated difficulties, but a governing strategy applied consistently across core eschatological doctrines. The final case study examines how this strategy is defended and normalized through appeals to so-called “substantial fulfillment,” where the concept of fulfillment itself becomes the object of redefinition.

7. Case Study III: Fulfillment

The appeal to fulfillment functions as the most comprehensive mechanism by which preterist eschatology secures itself against disconfirmation. Whereas the preceding case studies examined the redefinition of specific doctrines, fulfillment operates at a meta-level by reconfiguring the criteria by which fulfillment itself is assessed. In effect, fulfillment is transformed from a historically verifiable correspondence between promise and event into a flexible interpretive judgment governed by perceived theological equivalence rather than empirical adequacy (R7, R19).

In ordinary historical and theological usage, fulfillment presupposes recognizable correspondence between what is promised and what occurs. This correspondence is not exhausted by superficial resemblance, but it does require continuity across three basic dimensions: order, content, and magnitude. Promised events are expected to occur in the sequence indicated, to involve the realities described, and to manifest at the scale implied by the language of the promise. These criteria are implicit in the biblical presentation of fulfillment as public validation of divine speech.

Preterists’ appeals to fulfillment relax these criteria in coordinated ways. Narrative order may be compressed or rearranged through thematic or cyclical readings of apocalyptic sequence (R10). Promised content may be partially realized or symbolically transposed (R8, R26). Scope and magnitude may be reduced from universal to local through hyperbolic construals and land-language defaults (R3, R11). What remains constant is not the structure of the promise but the insistence that some meaningful first-century outcome must be designated fulfillment.

Under this model, fulfillment no longer requires that eschatological events occur as described or in the order specified. It is sufficient that an event be judged substantially equivalent in theological effect. Thus, the destruction of Jerusalem is said to fulfill cosmic-judgment language (R4); the covenantal transition is said to fulfill resurrection (R5); and the exercise of authority is said to fulfill the parousia (R1). Each substitution is defended because the “substance” of the prophecy has been realized, even where its concrete features have not.

The difficulty with this approach is not merely exegetical but epistemic. Once fulfillment is defined in terms of theological resemblance rather than historical correspondence, there is no principled limit to reinterpretation. Any shortfall in order may be dismissed as prophetic telescoping (R10); any absence of content resolved through symbolism (R8); and any discrepancy in magnitude addressed by scope restriction (R11). The fulfillment claim thereby becomes unfalsifiable, because the standards by which it might fail are perpetually adjustable.

Moreover, the appeal to fulfillment inverts the biblical logic of verification. In Scripture, fulfillment functions as evidence for the truthfulness of prophecy. In preterist usage, fulfillment becomes a conclusion protected from evidential scrutiny by interpretive elasticity. The prophecy is not vindicated by what occurs; rather, what occurs is redescribed until it can be said to vindicate the prophecy.

This redefinition also introduces a destabilizing asymmetry. Where the New Testament explicitly identifies fulfillments, most notably in the death and resurrection of Christ, the correspondence between promise and event is concrete, public, and specific. By contrast, in preterist eschatology, fulfillment is asserted precisely where such correspondence is lacking. Fulfillment thus operates under two standards: strict when history cooperates and elastic when it does not.

In this respect, fulfillment functions less as an explanatory category than as an interpretive safeguard. It ensures that no eschatological expectation can ever be judged unmet, because unmet expectations are reclassified as symbolically or substantially satisfied. The system thereby preserves internal coherence, but only by dissolving the criteria that give fulfillment its meaning.

Taken together with the analyses of resurrection and parousia, this case study completes the demonstration that preterism operates as a non-falsifiable eschatological system. At each point where historical correspondence is lacking, semantic, ontological, temporal, scope, or functional redefinition intervenes to prevent disconfirmation. Fulfillment is affirmed in every case, but never at the risk of failure.

8. Conclusion

This study has argued that preterism is best evaluated not merely as a disputed eschatological timetable, but as a comprehensive interpretive system governed by prior logical and epistemic commitments. When examined at the system level, preterism exhibits a defining characteristic: it systematically removes the conditions under which its central fulfillment claims could be shown false. The result is an eschatological model that is internally coherent, yet epistemically insulated.

The analysis began by establishing that biblical prophecy presupposes public verifiability. Prophetic fulfillment, as Scripture presents it, is not an inward or purely theological judgment, but a historically referential category capable of confirming or disconfirming

divine speech. This framework requires that non-fulfillment remain a meaningful possibility if fulfillment is to retain its epistemic content. Against this backdrop, the study identified a controlling false dilemma within preterist reasoning, namely, that exhaustive first-century fulfillment is the only alternative to prophetic failure.

Once this dilemma is assumed, interpretive pressure is predictably redirected. Rather than allowing historical correspondence to test fulfillment claims, the system preserves those claims through systematic redefinition. The case studies of resurrection and parousia demonstrated that where first-century history does not supply the promised realities, the meaning, ontology, scope, or verification criteria of those realities are adjusted so that absence no longer counts against fulfillment. The final case study showed that this pattern culminates in a redefinition of fulfillment itself, whereby order, content, and magnitude are rendered negotiable in the service of theological plausibility.

Taken together, these findings warrant the conclusion that preterism functions as a non-falsifiable eschatological system. Its fulfillment claims are not exposed to the risk of failure because the criteria of failure are continually reconfigured. This does not imply irrationality or bad faith on the part of preterist interpreters. Instead, it reflects a methodological choice to prioritize avoiding prophetic error over preserving fulfillment as a historically testable category.

The implications of this conclusion extend beyond the internal debate between preterist and futurist models. If fulfillment can be affirmed irrespective of historical correspondence, then the distinction between fulfillment and reinterpretation collapses, and prophecy ceases to function as evidence of divine faithfulness in history. By contrast, eschatological models that allow their claims to be tested, whether futurist, historicist, or otherwise, preserve the meaningfulness of fulfillment precisely by permitting the possibility of non-fulfillment.

The critique advanced here does not depend upon resolving every exegetical dispute associated with New Testament eschatology. It rests instead on a prior question: what must fulfillment mean if biblical prophecy is to remain intelligible, coherent, and epistemically responsible? Any eschatological system that answers this question by insulating itself from disconfirmation may succeed in preserving internal consistency. Still, it does so at the cost of the very category it seeks to defend.

In this respect, the issue raised by preterism is not ultimately one of timing, symbolism, or audience relevance, but of epistemic integrity. A prophecy that cannot fail cannot function as prophecy. Fulfillment that cannot be denied cannot meaningfully be affirmed. A biblically responsible eschatology must therefore retain not only the promise of fulfillment, but also the risk inherent in making promises about the future.

Appendix A — Taxonomy of Preterist Redefinitions (R1–R26)

R#	Category	Redefinition (Summary)	System Function
R1	Semantic	Coming ≠ personal arrival	Removes visibility/embodiment
R2	Semantic	Seeing ≠ visual perception	No observable event required
R3	Semantic	Universal terms = hyperbole	Local events satisfy global language
R4	Ontological	Judgment ≠ final judgment	Eliminates eschatological finality
R5	Ontological	Resurrection ≠ bodily resurrection	No bodies raised; death not reversed
R6	Ontological	Kingdom ≠ manifested reign	No material/geopolitical change
R7	Epistemic	Fulfillment ≠ correspondence	Non-falsifiable fulfillment
R8	Epistemic	Symbol ≠ symbol-with-referent	Detaches imagery from history
R9	Temporal	Nearness = exhaustion	A priori first-century terminus
R10	Temporal	Sequence ≠ chronology	Events rearranged thematically
R11	Scope	Earth (<i>gē</i>) = land by default	Global language localized
R12	Identity	Instrument/object collapse	Absorbs contradictions
R13	Identity	Reigning ≠ political sovereignty	Political language emptied
R14	Identity	Economic description ≠ reality	Maritime texts fit Jerusalem

R#	Category	Redefinition (Summary)	System Function
R15	Identity	Geography theologically irrelevant	Overrides material constraints
R16	Identity	City identity elastic	Prevents collapse on failure
R17	Identity	Historical guilt overrides context	Transfers blame across eras
R18	Causal	Judgment without appearing Judge	No need for Christ's appearing
R19	Functional	Partial resemblance = fulfillment	Guarantees fulfillment
R20	Functional	Identity oscillation allowed	Referent fluidity absorbs tension
R21	Functional	Chronological precision optional	Nero's death coexists with A.D. 70
R22	Functional	Worship ≠ cultic worship	Allegiance replaces worship
R23	Functional	Signs ≠ supernatural signs	No miracles required
R24	Functional	Death/revival ≠ literal	Narrative elasticity
R25	Functional	Authority ≠ comprehensive control	Regional power suffices
R26	Functional	Inspired- interpretation override	One metaphor controls others

Appendix B — Representative Preterist Sources by Redefinition

The following footnote-style references are representative, not exhaustive. They are intended to document that each analytic redefinition (R1–R26) corresponds to identifiable interpretive moves in mainstream preterist literature.

R1–R2 (Coming / Seeing redefined): J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887), esp. chs. 5–7; R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 158–181.

R3, R11 (Universal language localized): Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), 136–143; Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), 63–78.

R4, R18 (Judgment without finality or appearing Judge): Max R. King, *The Spirit of Prophecy* (Warren, OH: Parkman Road Church of Christ, 1971), 93–118; Russell, *The Parousia*, ch. 10.

R5, R26 (Resurrection redefined; inspired-interpretation override): Max R. King, *The Cross and the Parousia of Christ* (Warren, OH: Parkman Road Church of Christ, 1987), 321–366; Don K. Preston, *Into the Cloud* (Ardmore, OK: JaDon Productions, 2006), 191–230.

R6 (Kingdom as invisible reign): N. T. Wright (frequently cited by moderate preterists), *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 202–208; Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 321–334.

R7, R19 (Substantial/partial fulfillment): Sproul, *Last Days According to Jesus*, 228–243; DeMar, *End Times Fiction* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 195–213.

R8 (Symbol without concrete referent): David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance* (Fort Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), 43–58.

R9, R10 (Nearness and non-chronological sequence): Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, 65–92; Gentry, *Navigating the Book of Revelation* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2009), 23–41.

R12–R17, R20–R25 (Referent fluidity, identity shifts, historical elasticity): Don K. Preston, *Who Is This Babylon?* (Ardmore, OK: JaDon Productions, 2006); Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, chs. 13–17; DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 201–242.

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