

Non-Falsifiability in Action: An Exhaustive Case Study of Preterist Responses to the False Dilemma Critique

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Abstract

This article presents an empirical case study testing the claim that preterism functions as a non-falsifiable eschatological system. Building on prior work that argued this conclusion at the theoretical level, the present study examines whether preterism can tolerate genuine epistemic challenge when its controlling logical premise, the false dilemma between exhaustive first-century fulfillment and prophetic failure, is explicitly rejected. The analysis focuses on a recent scholarly critique by Elton L. Hollon (Hollon, 2023) and two independent preterist responses to that critique. (Preston, 2023) (Sedlak, 2025) Treating the exchange as observational data rather than polemical debate, the study maps each response exhaustively against a previously established taxonomy of interpretive redefinitions. The findings demonstrate that, despite significant differences in tone, method, and sophistication, both responses reinstate the false dilemma by reasserting non-negotiable temporal exhaustion and by systematically redefining the semantic, ontological, and epistemic criteria of fulfillment. The convergence of these redefinitions confirms that preterism cannot absorb falsification even when the dilemma motivating those redefinitions is removed. The study concludes that preterism's resistance to disconfirmation is not accidental or rhetorical but structural, confirming its status as a non-falsifiable eschatological system.

Keywords: preterism; falsifiability; eschatology; hermeneutics; prophetic fulfillment; Olivet Discourse

Author's Note on Research Continuity

This article is intended to function as a companion study to *Preterism as a Non-Falsifiable Eschatological System*. (Bramlett, 2025) The earlier work advanced a theoretical and methodological thesis: that preterism operates as an eschatological system insulated from falsification through coordinated semantic, ontological, and epistemic redefinition. The present study does not reiterate that argument. Instead, it subjects the thesis to empirical testing by examining how preterism responds when its controlling logical premise, the false dilemma between exhaustive first-century fulfillment and prophetic failure, is explicitly rejected in scholarly discourse.

The relationship between the two studies is therefore intentional and asymmetric. The first establishes a diagnostic framework; the second applies that framework to a live scholarly

exchange involving independent interlocutors. Readers may approach the present article independently, but it is designed to demonstrate that the theoretically identified redefinition patterns recur predictably in practice. Together, the two studies form a unified research program: one analytic, the other confirmatory.

1. Introduction

In *Preterism as a Non-Falsifiable Eschatological System*, (Bramlett, 2025) it was argued that preterism is best evaluated not merely as a disputed eschatological chronology but as a comprehensive interpretive framework governed by prior epistemic commitments. Central to that argument was the claim that preterism systematically removes the conditions under which its fulfillment claims could be shown false, primarily through coordinated semantic, ontological, and epistemic redefinitions. While that thesis was developed through conceptual analysis and representative doctrinal case studies, an obvious question remained: Does the thesis hold when tested against an actual scholarly exchange in which preterism is confronted directly with a falsifiability-based critique?

The present article addresses that question through an exhaustive case study. Rather than advancing a new theoretical critique, it examines how preterism responds in practice when its controlling logical assumption, the false dilemma between exhaustive first-century fulfillment and prophetic failure, is explicitly rejected. The study analyzes a recent peer-reviewed article by Elton L. Hollon that formally identifies and dismantles this dilemma, together with two independent preterist responses. The aim is not to adjudicate the exegetical merits of the dispute, but to observe whether preterist interpretation permits the possibility of non-fulfillment once the dilemma motivating exhaustive fulfillment is removed.

The thesis advanced here is that it does not. The case study demonstrates that, even when granted a logically coherent alternative to the false dilemma, preterist responses reinstate the same constraint by reasserting non-negotiable temporal exhaustion and by systematically redefining the semantic, ontological, and epistemic criteria of fulfillment. The result is not merely a failure to persuade, but a confirmation of non-falsifiability in action.

2. Methodology and Control Conditions

Methodological Note on Analytic Continuity. The analytic reference markers employed in this study (R1, R2, etc.) correspond to the taxonomy of interpretive redefinitions developed in *Preterism as a Non-Falsifiable Eschatological System*. (Bramlett, 2025) Their reuse here is intentional and methodological rather than derivative. The purpose is not merely terminological consistency, but empirical testing: if preterism functions as a coherent interpretive system, the same redefinitions should recur predictably when the system is subjected to live epistemic challenge. The present case study, therefore, treats the R-taxonomy as a set of falsifiable diagnostic controls. Convergence upon the same

redefinitions across independent responses constitutes positive confirmation of the system-level thesis; divergence would have counted against it.

This study adopts a case-study methodology standard to philosophy of science, intellectual history, and historiography, treating interpretive responses as observational data rather than as arguments to be refuted. The object of analysis is not whether preterism is true, but whether it is structured such that it could, in principle, be shown false. Accordingly, tone, motive, and rhetorical posture are bracketed. Only substantive interpretive moves are evaluated.

The control condition for falsifiability is straightforward. If preterism is a falsifiable eschatological system, then the removal of the false dilemma namely, the claim that prophetic credibility requires exhaustive first-century fulfillment should open conceptual space for at least one of the following: (1) acknowledgment that some eschatological expectations may remain unfulfilled; (2) allowance for delayed or staged fulfillment without semantic redefinition; or (3) recognition that historical non-correspondence could count against fulfillment claims. A response that permits any of these outcomes would constitute evidence against the non-falsifiability thesis.

Conversely, if responses reassert temporal exhaustion as non-negotiable and preserve fulfillment only by redefining the meaning, ontology, or verification criteria of prophetic language, the thesis is confirmed.

3. The Control Critique: Hollon on the False Dilemma

Elton L. Hollon's article, "Unsound and Informally Fallacious Preterist Arguments for Mark 13:24–27," provides an ideal control critique for the present study. (Hollon, 2023) Hollon identifies a recurring preterist argument that frames interpretation in terms of a false dilemma: either Jesus' time statements require that cosmic and parousia language be fulfilled exhaustively in the first century, or Jesus must be regarded as a failed prophet. Hollon demonstrates that this dilemma is logically unsound, arguing that alternatives such as proleptic language, delayed fulfillment, prophetic telescoping, or narrative correction of mistaken associations are neither incoherent nor unprecedented.

Crucially, Hollon does not defend futurism as such, nor does he presuppose inerrancy. He explicitly allows that non-fulfillment is a live epistemic possibility and treats prophetic credibility as a matter of correspondence rather than as a matter of theological rescue. His critique, therefore, removes the primary justificatory pressure that, within preterist reasoning, necessitates exhaustive first-century fulfillment. If preterism is falsifiable, it should be able to respond to Hollon's argument without reinstating the dilemma he dismantles.

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4. Response Analysis I: Don K. Preston

Don K. Preston's response to Hollon represents a forthright and explicitly polemical defense of preterism. (Preston, 2023) Rather than contesting Hollon's identification of the false dilemma at the logical level, Preston reasserts the necessity of exhaustive first-century fulfillment by treating nearness language as an objective and non-negotiable temporal delimiter. Imminence is interpreted as a matter of chronological exhaustion rather than expectancy or ethical urgency.

Preston secures fulfillment through intertextual linkage, covenantal typology, and appeals to inspired interpretive frameworks, rather than through publicly testable historical correspondence. (Preston, 2023) The effect is to preserve fulfillment claims while removing any conceivable condition under which they could fail. The absence of bodily resurrection, visible parousia, or universal gathering is rendered irrelevant because those categories are never permitted to function as correspondence claims.

5. Response Analysis II: Jonathan E. Sedlak

Jonathan E. Sedlak's response provides a contrasting yet convergent data point. (Sedlak, 2025) Sedlak adopts a restrained academic tone and explicitly affirms the legitimacy of logical critique in principle. Nevertheless, his substantive interpretive moves replicate the same structural pattern. He treats nearness language as requiring first-century exhaustion and employs literary restructuring to allow cosmic and parousia language to terminate in A.D. 70.

The coming of the Son of Man is redefined as covenantal vindication rather than personal arrival, and fulfillment is evaluated in terms of literary coherence and theological plausibility rather than historical correspondence. (Sedlak, 2025) Like Preston, Sedlak's response ensures that no observable absence can count against fulfillment.

6. Convergence and System-Level Analysis

The most significant result of this case study is the convergence between the two preterist responses. Preston and Sedlak differ markedly in tone, scholarly posture, and

argumentative style. Preston writes polemically and prescriptively; Sedlak writes analytically and irenically. Yet these surface differences do not translate into substantive methodological divergence. At the level relevant to falsifiability, both responses exhibit the same structural commitments.

Both reassert non-negotiable temporal exhaustion, treating nearness language as requiring complete first-century fulfillment rather than permitting expectation without consummation (R9). Both resolve resulting tensions not by reassessing the fulfillment thesis, but by redefining the ontology of eschatological events themselves, most notably by construing the parousia as covenantal vindication rather than personal arrival (R1), judgment as historical catastrophe rather than final adjudication (R4, R18), and resurrection or gathering language as covenantal transition rather than embodied or universal realities (R5).

Epistemically, both responses relocate fulfillment from the domain of historical correspondence to that of interpretive coherence. Fulfillment is adjudicated by theological plausibility, literary unity, and intertextual resonance rather than by publicly accessible events that could confirm or disconfirm the claim (R7, R19). The absence of a visibly appearing, universal gathering, or eschatological consummation is rendered irrelevant because the criteria of fulfillment have been redefined in advance.

This convergence is decisive for the present thesis. The recurrence of the same redefinitions across independent responses demonstrates that they are not ad hoc strategies employed to answer a particular critic, but structural features of preterist interpretation itself. Even when the false dilemma motivating exhaustive fulfillment is explicitly dismantled, the system reinstates it implicitly by refusing to allow any conceivable state of affairs in which fulfillment might fail. The same network of semantic, temporal, ontological, and epistemic redefinitions (R1–R5; R7; R9–R10; R18–R19; R26) reappears predictably, confirming that preterism cannot absorb falsification without ceasing to be preterism.

7. Implications for Eschatological Method

Eschewing polemics, the implications of this finding are methodological rather than doctrinal. An interpretive system that cannot respond to epistemic critique without redefining its own verification criteria no longer functions as a historically referential model of prophecy. Instead, it becomes an insulated explanatory framework in which fulfillment is guaranteed by construction. This does not entail irrationality or bad faith on the part of its proponents; it reflects a structural commitment to preserving fulfillment at all costs.

Such a commitment, however, comes at a high epistemic cost. Biblical prophecy, as presented within Scripture itself, presupposes public accountability. Fulfillment functions as evidence precisely because non-fulfillment remains a meaningful possibility. When that possibility is removed, whether by redefining time, ontology, or correspondence, the category of fulfillment loses its evidential force.

By contrast, eschatological models that permit genuine risk preserve the intelligibility of prophecy. Allowing for delay, partial realization, or even prophetic misunderstanding does not undermine the credibility of Scripture; it preserves the meaningfulness of historical claims. A system that can fail can meaningfully succeed.

8. Conclusion

This study set out to test, rather than merely assert, the claim that preterism functions as a non-falsifiable eschatological system. By examining how preterism responds to a direct and logically rigorous dismantling of its controlling false dilemma, the study has shown that the system cannot tolerate the removal of that constraint. Both preterist responses analyzed here reinstate exhaustive first-century fulfillment and preserve it through coordinated semantic, ontological, temporal, and epistemic redefinition.

The conclusion, therefore, follows with force. Preterism's resistance to falsification is not incidental or rhetorical, but structural. The system survives critique not by answering it on its own terms, but by redefining the conditions under which critique could succeed. In this respect, the present case study confirms the thesis of the prior theoretical analysis and demonstrates non-falsifiability in action.

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