An Examination of the Escatolical View of Scripture Emerging from Hanegraaf and Brouwer's First Book in the Last Disciple Series



AN EXAMINATION OF THE ESCATOLOGICAL VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

EMERGING FROM HANEGRAAFF AND BROUWER'S FIRST BOOK

IN THE *LAST DISCIPLE* SERIES

BY JIM HILL

The Last Disciple (hereafter *LD*) is a fictional novel set in the Roman Empire during the reign of Nero. The main character is Vitas, a trusted advisor of Nero that attempts to curb this beast's maniacal excesses and save Christians from torture and execution. The plot is complex and follows Vitas as he journeys to Jerusalem to report on the governor Florus who has been persecuting Jews

and Christians alike. During the adventure, Vitas becomes engaged to a former slave girl named Sophia who is a Christian. Eventually they meet up with John the Revelator who is being held in prison. The book is exciting but requires attention to details since this first book in the series spends an extensive amount of time building the characters for future books.

The thesis of this paper is the degree to which we can affirm the partial preterist position that emerges from Hank Hanegraaff and Sigmund Brouwer's first book in their eschatologically themed series. Specifically, what are the main eschatological themes in the book? Second, did John mean for us to refer to the first-century Roman ruler Nero in the book of Revelation when he spoke of the beast? Finally, can we interpret many of the events in the Olivet Discourse as having already found their fulfillment during Nero's persecution of Christians during the middle part of the first century? Hanegraaff stated in the afterward of his book that the theology in the series was predicated by a term that he invented called "exegetical eschatology."[1] The thesis therefore is the extent to which this eschatological perspective is theologically palatable as it develops within the *Last Disciple* and from other statements made by Hanegraaff.

The word *preterism* came from the Latin words *praeter* meaning "beyond," and *ire* which means "go." This eschatological view has interpreted certain OT and NT biblical prophesies as having already been fulfilled. Toussaint quoted Ice as indicating three forms of this theology, including mild, moderate, and extreme. Followers of the extreme form teach have taught that all biblical prophesy has been fulfilled and the Lord Jesus has already returned. Teachers of the moderate form have held that most Bible prophesies have been fulfilled except for the second coming of Jesus. Adherents of the mild form of preterism have held that the Tribulation spoken of in the Olivet Discourse and Revelation was fulfilled through the judgment of the Jews in 70 C.E. or Rome in 313 C.E.[2] It was this mild form of what we call partial preterism that was the subject of this treatise.

Tyndale released *The Last Disciple* in late 2004 in response to Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' highly successful *Left Behind* series. *Time* magazine interviewed Hank Hanegraaff when this first book was being released who said, "There is a lot of hysteria because of the *Left Behind* books." He continued, "The *Left Behind* books are part of a trend toward sensationalism and 'script torture' of the Bible."[3] Several recent events ignited this battling of end-times authors. First was the 1996 release of the *Left Behind* book and subsequent series by LaHaye and Jenkins. Second was the callous acceptance by many evangelicals to Jenkins' series. Many of the callers to Hanegraaff's *Bible Answer Man* program did not seem to be willing to rethink any of their eschatological view. A third factor in the debate was pregnant pause that ensued as Christian radio listeners waited for the release of Hanegraaff's own position on eschatology. Hank made many critical comments about Jenkins' book on his radio program. Whenever callers would ask for Hank's position, his response was to tell them to wait for his book. His main complaint was that many callers blindly followed the futurist, pre-millennial view like a pied piper. Listeners to the program weren't surprised when Hank released his book series with a different theological bent coauthored with novelist Sigmund Brouwer. After Tyndale released this first book in the fictional series in 2004, the second one entitled *The Last Sacrifice* followed in 2005.

Primary Theological Issues in *The Last Disciple*

Eschatology is a vast and complex subject. If we were to examine all of the theological issues that emerged from the *LD* we would be doing so right up until "the Lord himself (comes) down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God" (1 Thess 4:16). [4] Because of this complexity, we have narrowed the scope of this paper to the events in the Olivet Discourse with a brief reference to events mentioned in Revelation. Yet the interrelatedness of the material requires that we examine at least some of the main theological themes in the book. These are seemingly without number, but the main ones are as follows.

First, the *LD* is an outright rejection of the futurist view of eschatology. It espouses a partial preterist view regardless of what Hanegraaff says otherwise. This doesn't mean that we accuse Hanegraaff of an unorthodox Christian view. Adams provided an excellent treatise on the different between what he called an "orthodox preterists" and an "unorthodox preterists." Although theology is usually done in shades of gray, this debate on orthodoxy revolves around the heart of the Gospel, the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. The unorthodox preterist denies the second coming of Christ, saying that Jesus came spiritually in 70 C.E. They also deny the resurrection of the dead and relegate this to a spiritual sense.[5] Hanegraaff follows the orthodox view and doesn't in any way deny either the second coming of Christ or the resurrection of the dead. Even though Hank has rejected the prevailing eschatological view, his position isn't unorthodox in any fashion. We should discuss his beliefs with gentleness and respect as he likes to say on his program.

Second, the premise of *LD* almost entirely hinges upon an early dating of Revelation, before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. The thesis of the book is based upon this early dating of both Revelation and the entire NT. In his second book, Hank questions how John could have written Revelation and not mentioned that the temple had been destroyed. He said, "The point of all this is that if Revelation was written before AD 70, then it is reasonable to assume that the vision given to John was meant to reveal the apocalyptic events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem—events that were still in John's future but that are in our past." Hank went on to say, "First, it is instructive to note that the late dating for Revelation is largely dependent on a single—markedly ambiguous—sentence in the writings of Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons." He gave one single reason for rejecting the late dating (95 C.E.) of Revelation. [6] Geisler stated regarding the eschatology in the *LD* book, "There is strong evidence that Revelation was written in the 90s well after Nero was dead during Domitian's reign. If so, this would make the LD false." Geisler gave no less than ten reasons for the late dating of Revelation.[7] It is evident from history that Nero was a monster. However, the text of Revelation seems to indicate that the beast mentioned there is connected to a later Roman

figure or the nation as a whole. The first time that the beast appears is in Rev 11:7. The context of this passage is during the close of ministry of the two witnesses who are then overcome by the beast that came up from the abyss and killed them. Neither history or Scripture record the ministry of these two individuals during the timeframe of Nero. The beast could be prefigured by Nero, but certainly wasn't fulfilled by him.

Geisler continued to refocus the likely setting of Revelation in the future. He quoted Hanegraaff's book as saying that since John uses words like "the time is near" and "soon" in Revelation, this reveals that John could not have been looking towards the modern era. Geisler said, "If so, then on this premise the whole book of Revelation (including the Second Coming and Resurrection – Chapters 19-20) must refer to the first century since the word "soon" applies to the whole book of Revelation (1:1; 22:10). In this case full preterism follows which is heretical." Geisler found that the word translated "quickly" in various places in Revelation is *tachu* (tacu) meaning "quick, swift, or speedy." He said, "Hence this term need not, as LD argues, refer to a first-century event but to the imminent coming of Christ whenever it occurs."[8]

Third, *LD* incorporates metaphorical language of scriptural in a very literal fashion from the Olivet Discourse and Revelation. This is something that Hank, while on his radio program, has accused LaHaye of doing. Hanegraaff said, "The pretribulational rapture model featured in the Left Behind series interprets Revelation 13 in a strictly literal fashion."[9] Yet Hank did the very same thing in his book with a variety of scriptural texts. On the very first page of the book, Hanegraaff introduced Nero as a man dressed in a costume consisting of leopard's skin, eagle's wings, a bear's legs, and the head of a lion alluding directly to Daniel 7 and Revelation 13.[10] Before the end of the first chapter, Hanegraaff had openly identified Nero as the "beast" spoken of by John in Revelation.[11] Additional examples abound. One of the characters said, "Earthquakes seem to occur daily across the world."[12] Hanegraaff didn't do anything different than LaHaye in literalizing the details of Scripture, but he shouldn't accuse LaHaye of violating hermeneutical principles since *LD*

was filled with similar examples. On the positive side, Hanegraaff and Brouwer did a good job in painting this historical situation that existed in Jerusalem during the reign of Nero by including many true historical features.

Finally, *LD* inaccurately states the futurist position regarding the activities of antichrist in Rev. 13. Hanegraaff stated, "The pretribulational rapture model in the *Left Behind* series interprets Revelation 13 in a strictly literal fashion. Thus the antichrist dies and resurrects himself physically in order to vindicate his claim to be god."[13] Hank contrasted his approach with LaHaye's:

> In sharp contrast, The Last Disciple series exegetes Revelation 13 in light of the whole Scripture. Thus Satan can *parody* the work of Christ through 'all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders' (2 Thessalonians 2:9), but he cannot literally do what Christ did—namely, raise himself from the dead. . . .What is at stake here is nothing less than the deity and resurrection of Christ.[14]

The problem with Hank's thesis is that the biblical text does not plainly say that the antichrist does this. Revelation 13:3 states, "I saw one of his heads *as if* it had been slain, and his fatal wound was healed. And the whole earth was amazed and followed after the beast" (emphasis added). The NIV reads, "seemed to have had a fatal wound."[15] The word rendered "seemed" in the NIV is the Greek word ώς (hoos) which means, "that is to say, so to speak," or as in 1Thess 5:2; "like," in the sense "like a thief in the night."[16] The text goes on, "And he (the false prophet) *deceives* those who dwell on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who had the *wound* of the sword and has come to life" (Rev 13:14, emphasis added). These passages speak of how the false prophet *deceives* those on earth through the antichrist who was wounded *as if* dead. It is evident from these verses that the "death and resurrection" of the antichrist is a satanic deception. Scripture states, "And the whole earth was amazed" (13:3b). Therefore, LaHaye was justified in portraying an actual death and resurrection since the whole word was deceived by this satanic trick.

Norm Geisler reviewed the book and made the following statement regarding the preceding issues:

Many events in Matthew 24-25 and Revelation 6-18 were not fulfilled in A.D. 70 – at least not literally. For example, the stars did not fall from heaven (Mt. 24:29), nor were one-third of humans killed (Rev. 9:18), and neither did all the creatures in the sea die (Rev. 16:3) in A.D. 70. . . . Although *LD* disavows the label of "partial preterism" as well as "post-millennialism" this conclusion is in agreement with preterism. And if LD is right, then the rest of the Tribulation (Rev. 6-18) must be placed there too.[17]

Geisler hit on both the main eschatological theme and the problem with the partial preterist theology. The theme is that most of the events in Revelation were already fulfilled during the first-century except for the second coming of the Lord. The problem is that many of the events named by the partial preterists weren't completely fulfilled in that century. It's not so much that some of the events that occurred during the first century couldn't have fulfilled Scripture, but that they weren't fulfilled in the thorough manner that the futurists require. In any case, Jesus' birth certainly surprised many Jews who later believed in him. It was only after the fact that anyone could look into OT prophesy and locate the details of Jesus' coming. These are the reasons that our correspondence with those holding a partial preterist position must be seasoned with love and humility that is to be forthcoming of fellow believers (John 13:35).

The Olivet Discourse in *LD*

A well developed theology regarding the Olivet Discourse doesn't completely emerge in the *LD* since it is the first in the series. However, several themes do emerge regarding Jesus' prophetic speech heralded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. *LD* holds that the first portion of the scriptural text of the Olivet Discourse relates to the first century during the reign of Nero. In Matthew's version of the Discourse, Jesus predicted that the temple would be destroyed, then after a lengthy discourse he said in 24:34 that, "Truly I say to you, *this* generation will not pass away until all these things take place." Truly, what is meant by "this generation" is where the discussion on the Discourse must

begin. Hanegraaff quoted these verses in the afterward of his second book to tie the generation mentioned in verse 34 to the destruction of the temple in verse 2.[18] After Jesus' lengthy discourse, the Lord went on to say when all these things would happen. In verse 34 he said, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place." Hank agrees that Jesus has not yet returned,[19] therefore he cannot say that "this generation" is being spoken of in the near sense since if this was the case the entirety of prophesy in the Olivet Discourse would have had to have been fulfilled when the temple was destroyed. Hank can't have it both ways as Geisler aptly noted. He can't say that Jesus was saying that *all* of the events would be fulfilled in the lifetime of the generation existing around 70 C.E., but on the other hand look forward to Jesus' return on the clouds (v. 30) in the future.

Hank tries to get around these apparent difficulties. He said, "This is not to say, however, that all of the prophecies in Revelation have already been fulfilled. . . . Revelation not only predicted fore-future events, such as the coming apocalypse in John's lifetime, but also chronicles events that will take place in the far and final future."[20] According to Hank, "(He is) deeply committed to a proper *method* of biblical interpretation rather than any particular model of eschatology."[21] This is a reasonable hermeneutic in light of the vagaries of theological systems gone awry such as hyper-Calvinism or Wesley's Christian perfection. His method deserves serious attention even though at first glance from a futurist perspective it is logically inconsistent. Hanegraaff would have to draw a dividing line between which events were literally fulfilled during Nero's reign and destruction of the temple during the Jewish civil war and the ones that were not. Futurist often point to dual fulfillments of prophetic Scripture. This adds yet another layer of theology to that hermeneutic, making prophetic interpretation the vastly complicated science it is. Hanegraaff's partial preterist hermeneutic, even though he doesn't call it that, not only brings some simplicity but may also help to explain away some of the futurist's problematic verses such as Matthew 24:34 which according to Toussaint is a hard one for everyone.[22]

Perhaps what is needed in the eschatological debates on the Discourse is this entirely different perspective brought by the partial preterist scholars. Nixon began his book on the Olivet Discourse from this perspective with the following statement, "If anyone proposes a new interpretation of Scripture that contradicts the sober opinions of MOST known Bible scholars, he is probably wrong. However, this is one case, at least, where one must ignore all existing attempts to explain the Discourse." Next, he boldly stated that Matthew 24:3-22 was clearly fulfilled during the Jewish/Roman civil war of 66-70 C.E., and "the present writer knows of NO ONE who disagrees with this interpretation." [23] Nixon said, "The standards or pennants of the 10th legion (the Roman army's gods) were regarded as the "abomination of desolation" by the Jews of the city."[24] This interpretation contradicts even the most fundamental understanding of the futurist interpretation of the Discourse. Most futurist commentators point to these verses as having at least a future fulfillment regardless of what happened in the first century. Many look to the typology of the second century B.C.E. events under Antiochus Epiphanes, with final fulfillment in the future.[25] The preterist authors do offer an entirely different perspective, but not one without serious reactionary preconceptions against the futurists. Their reactions against the futurists seem to drive their theology as much as the futurists are driven by their own.

Hanegraaff's book wasn't without many redeeming theological expressions. He offered an excellent insight regarding the biblical author's use of visual imagery in the Discourse. In his story, Helius was second in command under Nero, and had one of his scribes read from the Gospel of Matthew 24:29-30:

> But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory."

His scribe related the meaning of this Scripture to him:

> If you were a Jew, you would be familiar with the imagery. *Coming on the clouds* is a familiar

> Jewish expression used by our prophets to communicate the majesty and sovereign power of God. His coming on the clouds translates to judgment for those who resist Him and blessing for those who bow the knee. . . . Isaiah, for example, used this very expression to describe God's retribution on Egypt when he prophesied that God would come in wrath and fierce anger to make the land of Babylon desolate, he said that 'the rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.'"[26]

As futurists, we have quite likely missed the sense of the Scripture by over literalizing it. This is hypocritical since it is the same thing that we earlier accused the partial preterists of doing. In the NASB, the text regarding the darkening of the sky is in all capitals, indicating an OT quotation. In terms of Jesus' promise to come in the clouds, should we literalize this in keeping with the promise by the angels in Acts 1:11, or should we allow symbolism in keeping with first-century Jewish thought? This latter course appears more logical, especially in light of Revelation 1:7: "Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over him." How can every eye see his coming at the same time if this is taken literally? In this text, the first portion concerning the coming of the Son of Man in the clouds is a direct quote from Daniel 7:13. In Exodus, the pillar of cloud was literally representative of the glory of God. Certainly, we have to allow for Jewish symbolism and visual imagery given to us by the Jewish scholars who created the NT.

Conclusion – No Logical Middle Ground

The value of Hank Hanegraaff's book was not its theological brilliance but rather the challenge that it offered his readers to develop their own eschatological position. The first book in the series didn't develop an extensive theology but rather laid the groundwork for subsequent books. Hank appears to have taken a partial preterist position not so much as a middle ground but as a reaction against the futurists. In doing so, he has attempted to force his own partial preterism system on them, rather than allowing for what he called an exegetical theology to interpret the text outside of existing theological systems. We cannot suggest a novel middle ground that would negate some of the difficulties with Hanegraaff's position while offsetting those of the futurist position. Instead, we must continue to wrestle with the whole of Scripture with special emphasis on proper contextualization of the eschatological events in the NT. We long for additional validation of the late dating of Revelation. This is not so much for the purposes of proving our futurist position, which we believe, is the correct one, but to glorify the Lord in more confidently proclaiming his coming judgment and glory. Govett said back in 1985, "In conclusion—fully I am convinced that no ingenuity can extricate the Praeterist interpreter from the endless difficulties, absurdities, historic contradictions which beset his scheme."[27]

END NOTES

[1] Hank Hanegraaff and Sigmund Brouwer, *The Last Disciple* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 2004), 393.

[1] Stanley D. Toussaint, "A Critique of the Preterist View of the Olivet Discourse." *BSac* 161 (2004): 469-70.

[1] Kathy Boot Thomas, "Is it the End of the World as This Author Knows It?," *Time Magazine* 164 no. 21 (November 24, 2004): No pages. Citied 24 March 2006. Online: http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,995693,00.html.

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[1] Jay E. Adams, *Preterism: Orthodox or Unorthodox?* (Stanley, N.C.: Timeless Texts, 2003), 2-3.

[1] Hank Hanegraaff and Sigmund Brouwer, *The Last Sacrifice* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 2005), 342-4.

[1] Norm Geisler, "A Friendly Response to Hank Hanegraaff's Book, *The Last Disciple*," n.p. [cited 23 March 2006]. Online: http://www.ses.edu/NormGeisler/lastdisciple.htm.

[1] Ibid.

[1] Hanegraaff and Brouwer, *Last Disciple*, 393.

[1] Ibid., 3.

[1] Ibid., 5.

[1] Ibid., 93.

[1] Ibid., 393.

[1] Ibid., 394.

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[1] Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1898), 33.139, 64.12.

[1] Geisler.

[1] Hanegraaff and Brouwer, *Last Sacrifice*, 342.

[1] Ibid., 344.

[1] Ibid., 344.

[1] Hanegraaff and Brouwer, *Last Disciple*, 393.

[1] Toussaint, 483.

[1] Thomas C. Nixon, *The Olivet Discourse – Mystery Revealed* (Bloomington, Ind.: 1st Books: 2003), x.

[1] Ibid., 172.

[1] See for example, John MacArthur, *The Second Coming* (Wheaton Ill.: Crossway, 1999) 105-112.

[1] Hanegraaff and Brouwer, *Last Disciple*, 101.

[1] Robert Govett, *The Locusts, The Euphratean Horseman and the Two Witnesses* (Miami Springs, Fla.: Conley and Schoettle, 1985), 145.

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[1] Hank Hanegraaff and Sigmund Brouwer, *The Last Disciple* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 2004), 393.

[2] Stanley D. Toussaint, "A Critique of the Preterist View of the Olivet Discourse." *BSac* 161 (2004): 469-70.

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[7] Norm Geisler, "A Friendly Response to Hank Hanegraaff's Book, *The Last Disciple*," n.p. [cited 23 March 2006]. Online: http://www.ses.edu/NormGeisler/lastdisciple.htm.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Hanegraaff and Brouwer, *Last Disciple*, 393.

[10] Ibid., 3.

[11] Ibid., 5.

[12] Ibid., 93.

[13] Ibid., 393.

[14] Ibid., 394.

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[16] Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1898), 33.139, 64.12.

[17] Geisler.

[18] Hanegraaff and Brouwer, *Last Sacrifice*, 342.

[19] Ibid., 344.

[20] Ibid., 344.

[21] Hanegraaff and Brouwer, *Last Disciple*, 393.

[22] Toussaint, 483.

[23] Thomas C. Nixon, *The Olivet Discourse – Mystery Revealed* (Bloomington, Ind.: 1st Books: 2003), x.

[24] Ibid., 172.

[25] See for example, John MacArthur, *The Second Coming* (Wheaton Ill.: Crossway, 1999) 105-112.

[26] Hanegraaff and Brouwer, *Last Disciple*, 101.

[27] Robert Govett, *The Locusts, The Euphratean Horseman and the Two Witnesses* (Miami Springs, Fla.: Conley and Schoettle, 1985), 145.

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