

THE WHOLE EARTH by Thomas Ice

“And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come.”
—Matthew 24:14

Preterists¹ believe that “Matthew 24:14 clearly shows that the gospel would be preached throughout the Roman Empire before Jesus returned in judgment upon Jerusalem,”² insists preterist Gary DeMar. He further claims:

The word translated “world” in 24:14 is the Greek word *oikoumene* . . . It is best translated as “inhabited earth,” “known world,” or the “Roman Empire” (Acts 11:28; 17:6). . . . This translation helps us understand that Jesus was saying the gospel would be preached throughout the Roman Empire before He would return in judgment upon Jerusalem. In fact, this is exactly what happened, and that is what the Bible says happened.³

This passage has not been fulfilled in the past! This is primarily true because the context of Matthew 24 is futuristic when we compare Scripture with Scripture. It is clear that Christ’s Discourse in Matthew and the Book of Revelation (chapters 4—19) both refer to the tribulation. Therefore they speak of the same time-period whether past or future.

THE MEANING OF WORLD

While it is true that “world” *oikoumenê* is used in the New Testament to refer to “the Roman Empire of the first century,” as a secondary meaning, its basic and primary meaning is that of “the inhabited earth.” It is significant to note that the most authoritative Greek lexicon classifies Matthew 24:14 as a reference to the entire inhabited earth and not the Roman Empire as noted by preterists.⁴ This compound word contains the prefix from *oikos* that means “house,” thus the “inhabited” or “lived-in” part of the world. The inhabited world could refer to the Roman Empire if supported by the context (for example Luke 2:1) since Roman arrogance thought that nothing of significance existed outside of their realm. However, this word was earlier “used of the Greek cultural world.”⁵

Since the core meaning of *oikoumenê* is “inhabited world,” then the scope of its meaning has multiple possibilities depending upon the context and referent. If the contextual referent is Roman, then it will mean the Roman Empire as in Luke 2:1. However, if its referent is global, then it must include the entire world as in Acts 17:31, which says, “He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness.” Surely this speaks of the whole globe since not a single individual will escape God’s judgment. Clearly *oikoumenê* can be used globally, even though it may have a more restricted use. The deciding factor is the context. Thus, if Matthew 24:24 was fulfilled in A.D. 70 then it would have a localized meaning as noted by DeMar. However, if it will be fulfilled in the future, then it has the meaning of the entire inhabited world at some future date, which would clearly include much more than the old Roman Empire.

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Since preterists and futurists both believe that Matthew 24:4–35 and Revelation 4—19 both refer to the same time-period in history (the tribulation), we can look at similar expression in Revelation in order to establish a more definitive interpretation of Matthew 24:14. I believe that Revelation 14:6-7 is a parallel passage to Matthew 24:14. Both speak of global evangelization during the seven-year tribulation, leading up to the second coming of Christ to planet earth. John MacArthur notes:

Just before the bowl judgments are poured out and the final great holocaust begins, and just before the increasingly rapid birth pains issue in the kingdom, God will supernaturally present the gospel to every person on earth. He will send an angel with “an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people,” saying, “Fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters” (Rev. 14:6-7).⁶

Interestingly both passages are mentioned around the middle of the tribulation. This will likely occur at that time because it is at the mid-point of the seven years that the beast will require the number—six hundred, sixty-six—on either the right hand or forehead of every human being in order to buy or sell (Rev. 13:16-18). Thus, it is important to know that the witness of the gospel is given to every individual in which they are given the opportunity to trust Christ before they take the number.

Jesus says in Matthew 24:14: “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations.” John observes in Revelation 14:6 an angel preaching “an eternal gospel . . . to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people.” Revelation 14:6 uses two expressions to describe those to whom the angel preaches. The first is the term “earth-dwellers” and the second is “to every nation and tribe and tongue and people.” “Earth-dwellers” is always a reference to individuals who are persistent unbelievers throughout Revelation (3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6; 17:8). The total expression of the second phrase “to every nation and tribe and tongue and people”⁷ “depicts the worldwide population.”⁸ How did these things happen in A.D. 70?

Preterists like DeMar cannot tolerate global language in either Matthew 24 or the Book of Revelation (4—20) if they have any chance of persuading anyone that their Israel focus of the past has any merit. Even though *oikoumenê* clearly means the entire inhabited world in Matthew 24, when one examines the parallel passage in Revelation 14:6 the expression “every nation and tribe and tongue and people” has to be a global reference. Why? It is clear that within the land of Israel there is only one nation, Israel; one tongue, Hebrew; and one people and nation, Israel. Preterists cannot on the one hand say that the phrase “earth-dwellers” refers to Israel as “land of Israel-dwellers” and then at the same time attempt to make “every nation and tribe and tongue and people” not refer to the entire earth’s population. Thus, because all three terms *oikoumenê*, “earth-dwellers,” and “every nation and tribe and tongue and people” must refer to the same referent, and it is clear that the meaning of “every nation and tribe and tongue and people” must refer to the whole world, then all of these terms have to have the same meaning. The meaning they must have is the entire population of the world. Since *oikoumenê* means “inhabited world,” it makes sense that there will be a greater

global population in the future than there was in the past, even within the Roman Empire. If Matthew 24 is future, then the Roman Empire cannot be in view, even though it was in view in passages like Luke 21.

THE GREAT COMMISSION

If DeMar's view of Matthew 24:14 is true, then one could legitimately assign a similar first century fulfillment to the phrase "all the nations" in Matthew 28:19. If one follows DeMar's logic it would have required the total fulfillment of the Great Commission by A.D. 70. Why? Our Lord says in the Great Commission that He will be with us "always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). This is very similar to the phrase "end of the age" in Matthew 24:3. DeMar teaches that the end of the age occurred, you guessed it, in A.D. 70.⁹ Since He applies almost all other uses of the end of the age to the first century, then why not Matthew 28:20. In fact, fellow preterist, Don Preston has written a whole book, using just such preterist logic, that the Great Commission was in fact fulfilled by A.D. 70.¹⁰ Apparently DeMar does not like the implications of his preterist position when consistently applied to the whole New Testament.

CONCLUSION

The preterist arguments for a first-century fulfillment of Matthew 24:14 are less than compelling. Their insistence that *oikoumenê* in Matthew 24:14 must refer to the ancient Roman Empire has no traction. If Matthew 24:14 is a future event, then the gospel will be preached across the globe as described in Revelation 14:6-7, which I and many other Bible students believe is a parallel passage. Both passages are set in contexts that tell us that this global evangelization will take place just before the middle of the seven-year tribulation. This passage was no more fulfilled during the nativity of the church than was the Great Commission. The prophecy of Matthew 24:14, like all of those in that context, awaits a future fulfillment, specifically during the future tribulation. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Preterists are those who believe that the Book of Revelation and the Olivet Discourse were fulfilled through the events of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70.

² Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 88.

³ Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of the Left Behind Theology* (Nashville: Nelson, 2001), pp. 82-83.

⁴ William F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 700.

⁵ Horst Balz & Gerhard Schneider, editors, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), vol. 2, p. 503.

⁶ John MacArthur, *The New Testament Commentary: Matthew 24—28* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), p. 29.

⁷ The phrase "every nation and tribe and tongue and people" or slight variations of it are used seven times in Revelation (5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15) and always refer to all the people on the planet.

⁸ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An exegetical commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1995), p. 203.

⁹ DeMar, *End Times Fiction*, pp. 74-75.

¹⁰ Don K. Preston, *Into all the Word: Then Comes the End!* (no publishing information, 1996).