

### Prophetic Messages in ACTS

Several months ago we scanned the New Testament writings in our beginning study of the “parousia,” “the coming of the Lord.” Then we looked at specific messages in some individual books which studies invariably included ties with other books that speak on the same subject. In them we have picked up various vital points from Luke’s record in Acts already. Now let us consider some more from Luke’s historical record without belaboring points we have already discussed.

Jesus continued speaking to the disciples concerning the kingdom of God after he was raised. The disciples inquired of Jesus, “Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus did not answer in terms of time, but told them to wait in Jerusalem for power from the Holy Spirit. At that time they would become his witnesses. While he was speaking, “he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” Then they were told, “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1). The imminent “coming of the Lord” was a theme of the gospel records and from this point continued to be given prominence throughout the rest of the New Testament writings.

The time and nature of his appearing has been the subject of speculation ever since. In previous lessons we have shown that this refers to what Jesus said would happen in their generation (Matt. 24) and what John depicted (Rev. 1). This connection and proposal of its fulfillment in their generation is discounted by most disciples, however. They still look for a literal appearing of Jesus that everyone on earth will see physically. It plainly says he went up in the clouds and will return on the clouds. That is literal. Or is it?

There is no sure rule to follow in determining what is literal and what is symbolic, but sometimes other passages give us a real key. In irrefutable manner, John Bray shows this promise to be figurative or symbolic. He uses the King James Version which has “in like manner” where other versions have “in the same way.” He wrote in his mailout of April 23, 2001:

*“In Like Manner”*

Acts 1:11 says that “this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.”

\* If “in like manner” means “in exactly the same way,” would “in the likeness of his death” in Romans 6:5 mean that we have died in exactly the same way Jesus died?

- \* If “in like manner” means “in exactly the same way,” how then does Jesus come from heaven riding a white horse (Rev.19:11)?
- \* If “in like manner” means “in exactly the same way,” how then does the Lord come “with ten thousands of his saints” (Jude 14)?
- \* If “in like manner” means “in exactly the same way,” how then does Jesus come “as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west” (Matt. 24:27)?
- \* If “in like manner” means “in exactly the same way,” how then does Jesus come “with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God” (1 Thes. 4:16)?
- \* If “in like manner” means “in exactly the same way,” how then does Jesus come “in flaming fire” (2 Thes. 1:8)?

Each of these references, except the first, cited by John Bray add some element of meaning to the one and same “return” or “coming” of Christ. Perhaps you will agree on some of the symbolic meanings which I have drawn from the contexts of the passages. Read the texts in context. Riding the white horse may picture Jesus coming in righteous judgment as he deals with the rejecting people. Coming with myriads of his saints would depict him as a victor executing judgment against and convicting the ungodly. The coming in flaming fire would suggest the destruction and annihilation of those who know not God and obey not the gospel. As a lightning flash is evident to all locally, so the effects of his return would be evident across the area. The trumpet of God may symbolize the calling of his people into assembly.

Within context, the meaning of those symbols may be expanded more fully. They all depict what was to transpire at Jesus’ soon coming in their generation. In the undeniable fulfilling of Jesus’ own words in the dramatic events relating to the destruction of Jerusalem, his “coming” or his “presence” was clearly revealed to all though no physical body of Jesus was seen. No physical throne was produced for an earthly kingdom, but the spiritual reign of Christ was fully established.

In previous lessons we have reviewed how the power came with physical manifestations of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit identified and empowered spokespersons of both genders, and also identified the converts of various segments of society in all nations as his one body.

In his discourse on Pentecost, Peter used Joel’s words to warn that the “day of the Lord” was coming, “the great and manifest / terrible day.” Because of that impending doom, he called for repentance and obedience of those who rejected Jesus. He urged them further to save themselves from the fate of that crooked

generation. At least some of his audience would live to see the long-predicted catastrophe of Israel and Jerusalem .

Upon the healing of the crippled beggar (Acts 3), a crowd gathered in awe of the miracle. Peter used this opportunity to tell them of Jesus. He pointedly declared that the God of their fathers had sent the Christ, but “You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go.” He continued his convicting testimony, but then tempered it with, “Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders.” Then he urged, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you --- even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets” (NIV). The NIV offers a more accurate rendition than “whom the heaven must receive, until the times of restitution of all things” of the KJV.

The prophets had for centuries pointed to the coming of the Messiah and the fulfilling of God’s promises through him. The working of God through Israel was for that purpose. He was bringing all things together in Christ in his spiritual kingdom. The urgency of the need for repentance was due to the rapidly culminating of God’s plan in their generation. To inject the thought of this referring to a renovation of this planet or universe is without justification.

After coming down from the mountain of the transfiguration, the disciples asked Jesus why the scribes said Elijah must come. “Elijah does come first to restore all things ... I tell you that Elijah has come...” (Mark 9:9-13). John the Baptist was the Elijah who was to come. He cried out urgently for repentance because of the nearness of the kingdom of heaven, and he pointed to Jesus. Thus the restoration was in progress and the time of refreshing was near. Jesus ascended to the Father as High Priest with the blood of the covenant. Ten days later three thousand persons became citizens in that spiritual kingdom of heaven. Thousands more would follow soon, including persons from all nations. All was coming to a climactic fulfillment, and that climax would be seen by their generation.

In his parables about the kingdom, Jesus depicted himself as going to the “far country” to receive the kingdom, then to return to receive his kingdom and to punish those who had opposed. (See: Parable of the Pounds, Luke 19:11-17; Parable of the Vineyard, Matt. 21:33-43; Mark 12:1-14; Luke 20:9-19.) As we have observed in previous lessons, those prophetic parables pointed to the second coming of Christ in the culminating events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem and the total succession of the kingdom of heaven over the earthly kingdom of Israel. The heavens “received” (more accurately, “retained”) him until that time of the complete / perfect restoration -- that great and notable day, the last day, the close of the age.

Those developments include the fulfillment of Paul's declaration to the Athenians that "he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed..." (Acts 17:31). With Jesus' sacrifice having opened the way into heaven, the long-awaited redemption and separation of the righteous would occur at the time of his "parousia." For more on this, please read again *Freedom's Ring*, No. 68, "Prophetic Parables."

Through the years, I have been puzzled by the abrupt ending of Biblical history. Luke stopped short with no benedictions or farewells, as though he were going to bed with plans to continue his writing the next day. But the historian stops there. If the Lord wills, another essay will offer some thoughts on this matter.

(Cecil Hook, August 2001) []



